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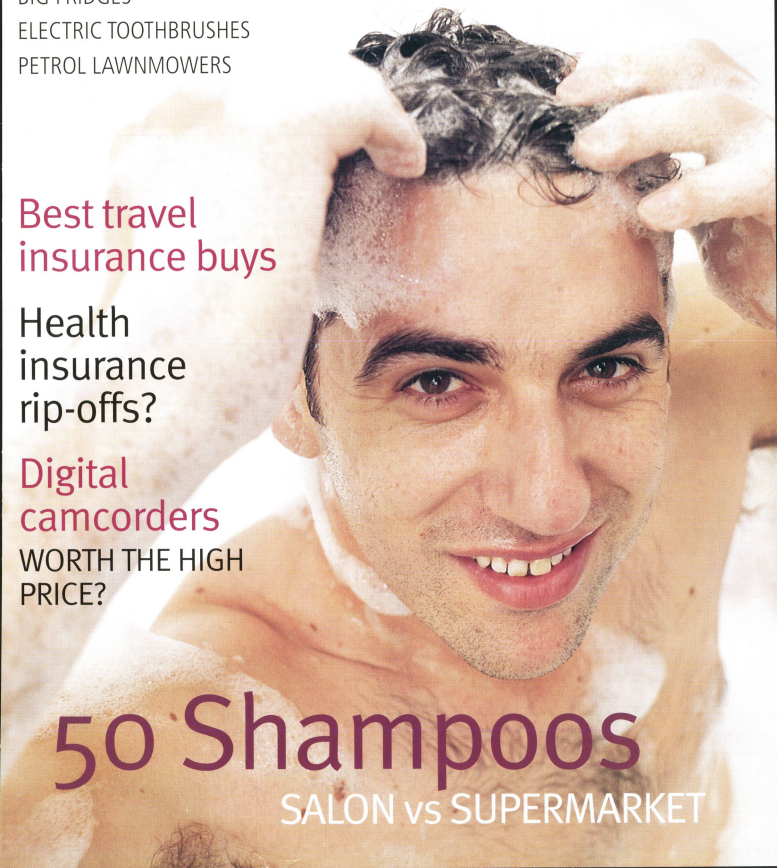
CHOICE

Independent information for smart consumers

Tests

BIG FRIDGES
ELECTRIC TOOTHBRUSHES
PETROL LAWNMOWERS



Best travel insurance buys

Health insurance rip-offs?

Digital camcorders

WORTH THE HIGH PRICE?

50 Shampoos

SALON vs SUPERMARKET

Health insurance back in the spotlight

CHOICE has often spoken out against the Federal Government's efforts to force people into private health insurance. Whether you believe in it or not — or even think you might use it — financial considerations now make it harder to make your own choice whether this is essential insurance or not: you're offered a 30% rebate for having it, along with penalites for high income earners who don't take it up and for those who join after the age of 30.

We still think the government's money — and mouth — would be better directed towards improving the public health system. But until recently you could at least be confident of getting some of your money's worth if you claimed on your private health insurance.

Now we hear of instances where people with private insurance have been turned away from private hospitals or asked to pay a 'security deposit' first — even emergency cases. If you can't produce the money upfront, you could be sent off to a public hospital (see page 12).

It may be the hospitals rather than the insurers at fault, but that doesn't change the outcome for consumers. You run the risk of paying very highly for important services that might be denied to you. Under those circumstances, why bother with private insurance?

There's no evidence of better treatment at private hospitals, only perhaps of more comfort or convenience, so you could decide to rely on the public system. Or you could self-insure — save or invest a certain amount each year that's available to pay for private health treatment. If you don't end up using it, it's still yours (and earning interest), rather than lining an insurance company's coffers.

You may not be able to beat private insurance, but you don't have to join it.

Jane Mackenzie, Editor

CHOICE

is published by the Australian Consumers' Association

YOUR LETTERS

We welcome the letters you send us — please always include a daytime telephone number so we can contact you quickly if we want to follow up your letter. We're sorry we can't answer every letter we receive, but we do use them in our research. Thanks for taking the time to keep in touch.

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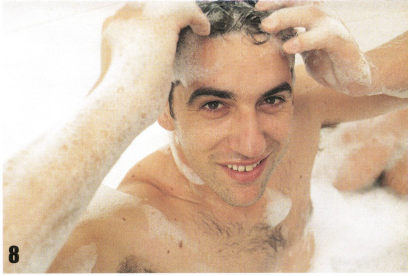
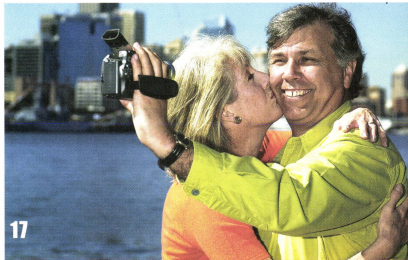




FOOD IRRADIATION OK'D FOR AUSTRALIA

Food irradiation was approved in Australia in September for the first time, and irradiated foods will soon be on our supermarket shelves. The state, territory and federal ministers in charge of food regulation (agriculture, trade, small business and health ministers) approved the irradiation of herbs, spices and herbal tea and infusions — at levels three times the current international standard.

This is out of step with other countries that allow irradiation, and in the opposite direction to European trends, where the EU is putting all irradiation plans on hold pending further consultation, due to overwhelming community opposition to its use to sterilise food.

Irradiation is used to kill bacteria, fungi, insects and other organisms that spoil dry food like herbs, spices, seeds, nuts and tea. Food doesn't become radioactive when it's irradiated, but there have been reports that the process can destroy some flavour compounds. At the current international standard level, studies indicate no detectable change in the flavour or aroma of irradiated paprika, black pepper, caraway seeds, marjoram, thyme, nutmeg, cinnamon and powdered turmeric, but fenugreek and chopped orange and lemon peel have been reported as inferior after irradiation. With higher levels of irradiation the effect could be greater.

VANESSA MARSHALL

The issue had a rushed assessment here, shortening the period when the public could tell the Australia New Zealand Food Authority (ANZFA) what they thought about the proposal, as it was considered an 'urgent' application. ANZFA said it was keen to get food irradiation approved as an alternative to a fumigant currently used on herbs and spices, ethylene oxide, which may be carcinogenic.

ANZFA had previously given industry until the end of September to get rid of all residues of the gas in food products. Now, though, it's extended the ethylene oxide residue limits for another two years, leaving us not only with the fumigant but also with unknown potential long-term effects from food that's been exposed to gamma irradiation up to levels that haven't been tried before.

A major issue with irradiated food is your right to know and therefore choose whether or not to buy it. Irradiated food is to be labelled, but how clear the labels will be is another matter. ANZFA allows statements such as, "Treated with ionising radiation" or "Treated with ionising electrons". The Consumers' Association would prefer to see it stated even more clearly on the front of the pack: 'Irradiated [name of food]', along with an easily identifiable symbol.

Want more hot dinners?

It's dinner time and you're enjoying a nice hot lasagne. But by the time you're ready for seconds, it's gone cold.

Does this scenario sound familiar? If you enjoy taking your time with your meal or have trouble keeping food warm when you're entertaining, the **SUNBEAM Buffet Cordless Warming Tray** may help. Simply plug the warming tray into a power outlet and, according to the instructions, its ceramic core should heat to 210°C in around six minutes. Unplug it, set it on the table with your dishes on top and away you go — it's supposed to retain and emit heat for up to an hour.

DOES IT WORK?

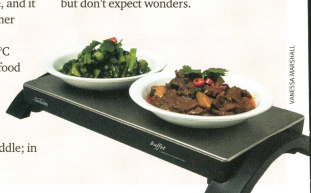
We put the buffet to the test, timing how long it could keep food at a safe temperature of at least 70°C. When we heated the tray, its thermostat switched off at 150°C — well short of the 210°C claimed in the instructions — after only four and a half minutes.

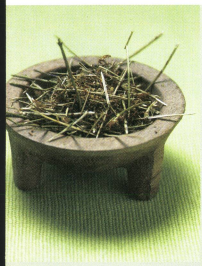
We heated two equal servings of mussaman beef to 90°C, and placed one on the warming tray and the other on the table. We recorded the temperature of the food at 10-minute intervals and also checked the evenness of the temperature across the tray.

The food on the buffet stayed above 70°C for about 40 minutes — that's half an hour longer than the food left on the table, and it also kept the food substantially warmer over the whole hour. It's likely that a starting temperature higher than 90°C and/or a lid on the dish would keep food warmer for longer (which of course is also true if you just leave the food on the bench).

However, it has limitations: for example, the tray is hottest in the middle; in the corners we recorded maximum temperatures of only about 60°C after heating. This means dishes placed on the edges of the tray won't stay warm as long as the others — a problem if you're trying to keep more than one dish warm, or your dish is as large as or larger than the tray (20 x 40 cm).

With a retail price of around $100, the **SUNBEAM Buffet Cordless Warming Tray** could be useful for keeping dinner-party dishes hotter — and safer — for longer, but don't expect wonders.


VANESSA MARSHALL



Herbs and drugs: beware

Do you know which complementary medicines to avoid if you're pregnant? Which herbs interact with which drugs and other herbs to increase your chances of heavier bleeding, especially during surgery? Which herbs reduce the effects of the contraceptive pill? (If you'd like to know the answers, see below.)

In September CHOICE we reported that about half the people who responded to our alternative health survey hadn't told their doctor about complementary or alternative therapies they used. But some of these therapies have serious side effects, especially when combined with other drugs and other complementary medicines and food. So tell your doctor and your complementary health therapist about everything you're taking.

CHOICE Online has a list of over 30 herbs and their potential side effects when mixed with other drugs, complementary medicines and foods, based on current medical evidence. Just type 'herbs & drugs' into the search box on the home page.

Answers:

- **Herbs and spices to avoid during pregnancy:** Black cohosh, celery, chamomile, devil's claw, feverfew, garlic, ginseng, horseradish, passionflower, red clover. Also phytoestrogens and soy protein.
- **Herbs and spices which increase bleeding and that you should stop taking at least seven days before surgery:** Dong quai, evening primrose oil (also starflower or borage oil), feverfew, garlic, ginger, ginkgo biloba, ginseng, meadowsweet, willowbark. Also vitamins E and K.
- **Herbs that may reduce the effect of the contraceptive pill:** Saw palmetto, St John's wort.

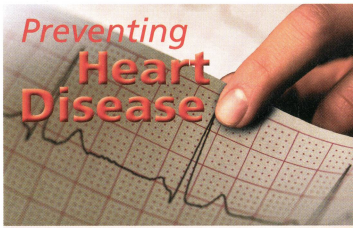
UPDATE

FAX MACHINES

CHOICE, September 2001

Since publishing this test we've received more information from Brother International about its film ribbon prices — with an apology for originally providing incorrect data.

We've used the correct information to calculate new printing costs for these models, and found that the **BROTHER FAX-645** costs around 13 cents per page, the **BROTHER FAX-920** just 9 cents per page. So, as well as being the two top performers in our test, they're also the cheapest models to run (not the **SHARP FO-785**, as stated on page 41).



Getting to the heart of the matter

Heart disease is still the nation's number one killer, but we're learning more about how to prevent it. Some of the latest research findings are presented in the CHOICE *Health Reader*'s October issue, including the following.

- **Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) doesn't reduce the risk of heart disease.**

Oestrogen, the main ingredient in HRT, has traditionally been thought to help protect the heart and thus prevent heart disease. This was an assumption based on studies showing that women taking HRT have fewer heart attacks — but it also seems that these women are healthier in general.

New studies are under way to find out whether the hormones themselves help, but early results suggest there are no heart health benefits from HRT. The National Heart Foundation of Australia has consequently issued a statement recommending that the decision to take HRT be based on factors other than heart disease.

- **Walking lowers blood pressure.**

A recent analysis of 16 studies looking at the effects of walking on blood pressure found a clear relationship between distance walked and reduced blood pressure — even in the absence of weight loss.

- **Learn the ABCDES of preventing heart attack.**

Aspirin, B vitamins, cholesterol lowering, dietary management, exercise and stopping smoking … leading American cardiologist Dr Arthur Leon has come up with a list of actions that can be taken to reduce the risk of heart attack — all under the acronym of ABCDES. Other actions include alcohol only in moderation, anti-coagulant drugs (such as warfarin), behaviour change (to do with diet and exercise), vitamin E, stress management and social support.

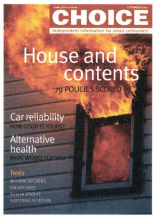
For more on these and other health issues see October *Health Reader*. To subscribe phone our Consumer Services on 1800 069 552.

CHOICE CUTS

UPDATE

HOME AND CONTENTS INSURANCE

CHOICE, September 2001



We've had several inquiries about why **WESTERN QBE** wasn't included in our comparison of home and contents insurance policies.

As a result, we've analysed the **WESTERN QBE** defined events policies. Their overall scores are as follows:.

- **WESTERN QBE** home contents (available in all states except the NT): 72% (range of other policies' scores: 48%–94%).
- **WESTERN QBE** home building (WA only): 82% (range: 60%–98%).
- **WESTERN QBE** home building (other states except the NT): 80% (range: 60%–98%).

The table on page 27 of the September issue has the full list of policies and scores if you'd like to compare them.

We've also added these policies to our online database. If you have Internet access, go to www.choice.com.au and type in 'Theft! Fire! Storm!' in the search box, click on that article and then on 'Home and contents insurance selector' on the right of the screen to find the best policies for your situation.

We always try to make our insurance comparisons as comprehensive as possible and we apologise for not including **WESTERN QBE** on this occasion.

CORRECTIONS

SECATEURS

CHOICE, September 2001

The profile photo on page 31 showed the wrong model of **CYCLONE** secateurs: it was the **Compact Bypass Pruner 657658**, which was also in our test, instead of the equal top performer, the **CYCLONE Handy Pruner 657412**, which is pictured here. Our apologies for any confusion caused.

We've also had queries about the price. We bought the **Handy Pruner** for $19.65, not on special, but have since heard of prices up to $30 for the same model. So it may pay to shop around.

CHOICE CUT

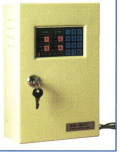
CHOICE, OCTOBER 2001

Numbers now mobile too

On page 4 we said, "If you've got a prepaid package you may need to get the SIM card unlocked before you can move to a new provider." In fact it's your handset that needs to be unlocked; you're throwing out your old SIM card and getting another from your new provider.

HOME SECURITY SYSTEMS

CHOICE, May 2001



On page 12 we said the **AEI Burglar Alarm System for Commercial and Residential Security HA-871 (L5149)** has a phone dialler that can dial two lines. In fact the system has two output terminals that a professional installer could use to trigger such devices as a phone dialler.

WORLD CONSUMER SNAPSHOT

RING, RING — IT'S THE TRAFFIC COPS

If you've ever had your car towed away because you'd parked illegally, you'll be interested in *Test* magazine's July report on a German court finding: police can reasonably be expected to phone the driver of an illegally parked car. It's often a faster remedy than a towing service and the driver saves the towing costs, though they're still up for a fine.

Consumers can now get a sticker for their car windscreen via the Internet that says (in German), "Please don't tow away! My mobile phone number is ... ... Please phone me. I'll be at the car within two minutes."

Great! Now where do we apply for one in English?

DOES MONEY MAKE YOU SICK?

Not parting with it, that is, but the substance itself. *Test* also reported in July on criticism of the new Euro coins' 25% nickel content, as nickel already constitutes the most common contact allergy in Germany. According to *Test*, jewellery and other items that contact skin must have less than 0.5 micrograms of nickel per square centimetre. Perhaps European bank tellers should wear gloves.

WHEELIE GOOD

Which? magazine recently tested the latest thing to hit Britain in footwear — sneakers with built-in retractable wheels, so you can skate or walk without changing shoes, or even retract the wheels on one shoe and scoot yourself along. They cost around $180.

A group of children tried one of the first available brands of the combined trainer/skate and, although not as good as inline skates, most found them a lot of fun and liked the look of them. Before you rush through the Christmas orders, though, check with the boys — a couple of them found the platform style a bit girly.

YOUR LETTERS

Telstra troubles

Late last year I replied to a Telstra promotion, in which it was stated that if you have three Telstra accounts on the same bill you qualify for a 10% discount. I rang the advertised number and was told that I'd been accepted, but didn't receive any discounts on my subsequent accounts.

When I inquired about this I was told that as I also have an account with Optus, I'm not eligible for the discounts, and that the person who told me I did qualify didn't understand the rules. I have since received two emails telling me that I qualify for the discounts, but alas no discounts. Telstra told me these emails were computer-generated, so apparently the computer also doesn't understand the rules.

I was also told that, because of the Optus account, I'm not a loyal customer, although I have four Telstra accounts in total. The trusty computer, however, thanked me for my "continued support and loyalty to Telstra".

Is this less than honest advertising by the telecommunications companies? Who would know? The average customer would have to make a full-time job out of trying to seek a 'fair go' from these companies!

Gary Osborne
Via Internet

We phoned Telstra, which confirmed that its 10% discount package is designed to reward 'loyal' customers. To qualify, you need to sign up to a Telstra plan for all your long-distance (including international) home phone calls, your mobile and the Internet. If you have a long-distance call plan with another company, for example, you won't qualify for the discount.

We don't think the information contained on the Telstra website clearly sets out the conditions that apply to these discounts. We certainly don't think it's acceptable for computer-generated letters to promise discounts that aren't forthcoming.

Buy Australian

I enjoyed your article on buying Australian. You hit the nail on the head when highlighting "the inadequacies of the 'country of origin' labelling laws".

Logan Farm Australian Stir Fry, produced in New Zealand, has been on supermarket shelves since 1994. The product fully complies with the Food Act and the Food Standards Code with respect to labelling. Why? Because the use of the term 'Australian' is regarded as

appropriately distinguishing it from 'Asian' varieties of stir-fry using 'Asian' vegetables, and not indicating or suggesting origin or place of manufacture. Neither do Mexican corn chips, Swiss ice cream, Singapore noodles, Indian butter rice, etc.

I counted 28 products across 18 different brands that used a country in the label to describe the contents that differed from the point of manufacture. And that was just in a one-hour trip to one supermarket.

Where does that leave the consumer? We received one complaint from a consumer last year, the first in seven years and over 1.5 million packs sold. And she had a point… so we've changed our packaging to 'Aussie Style Stir Fry'. I hope we've made the right decision for consumers and shareholders.

Derek Delaney
Sales & Marketing Director
Logan Farm Pty Ltd
Bundall, Queensland

Our June issue featured a picture of the original Logan Farm 'Australian Stir Fry', on page 12 — see above for the label's new wording. We're glad this company has now made it a bit easier for consumers to work out whether a product is made in Australia or not.

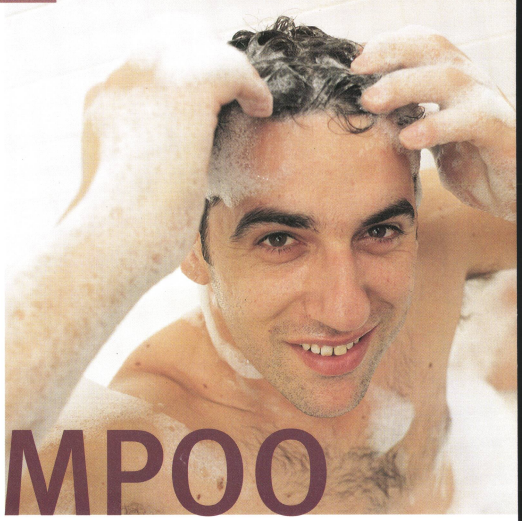
THUMBS UP

- Roger Ashley of Bonnet Bay, NSW, gives a big thumbs-up to the US website **Amazon.com** which, after sending him the wrong book, promptly sent the correct one and suggested he give the first book away to a school or a library.
- From Bill Warren, in Port Macquarie, NSW, thumbs-up to his local **Retravision**, which delivered him a replacement blender after he dropped and broke his.
- Elizabeth Rose of Beverly Hills, NSW, gives a thumbs-up to **Beaurepaires** of Bankstown, which checked her tyre carefully for leaks and, when they couldn't find any, told her to keep an eye on it, and then repainted it — all free of charge.
- Megan Lovell, via Internet, gives a hearty thumbs-up to **Jay Jays** boutique in Burwood, NSW — she was impressed to see their receipts explain their refund policy in simple language, as well as customers' statutory rights.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

We want to hear from you — your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. To thank you for writing to us, *Your Letters* awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'. This month's winner, Gary Osborne, receives *The Hard Word*, or any other book of his choice from Consumer Bookshelf, pages 33 to 35.

We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract. See page 2 for how to reach us. And keep your letters and emails coming about *positive* outcomes following your complaint to a retailer, manufacturer or tradesperson. Address your letters to 'Thumbs up' at the address on page 2.



Can you find a good shampoo on supermarket shelves, or do you need to spend big bucks for a salon product?

SHAMPOO

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Shampoos bought** *at the hairdresser's are generally much more expensive, but our trialists found them no better than many supermarket brands. The top six shampoos in our trial all came from supermarkets, and cost on average half as much or less than the salon shampoos.*
- **What makes a good shampoo?** *According to our trialists, it's the 'clean' feeling after the wash, an appealing fragrance and good lather and consistency.*
- **Need help** *sorting fact from fiction when you're reading hair care labels?* *See* Marketing speak, *page 9.*

In grocery stores alone, 18 million litres of shampoo are sold annually, for almost $200 million. How can you find the best without trying dozens of products? To find out for us, we asked nearly 500 CHOICE Home Testers to trial 50 shampoos for normal hair or frequent washing.

As well as making your hair feel clean, a good shampoo should leave it supple, shiny and easy to comb through and style. Do you have to spend a fortune on a salon brand to find one?

Not according to our trialists: no salon product made it into the top half dozen. The 10 included in our trial of 50 shampoos cost on average around $4.65 per 100 mL — even though we bought some of them at cheaper specialist stores. But the six shampoos our trialists liked best were widely available in supermarkets and cost around $1.75 per 100 mL.

For the extra money for a salon brand you won't necessarily get a shampoo based on better ingredients or formulations. A shampoo is essentially a detergent (surfactant) diluted in water, with a few extra ingredients. The detergent removes dirt and sebum from hair and scalp, washing it squeaky clean.

Extra ingredients are added to make the hair more manageable and the shampoo more appealing to consumers, or purely for marketing purposes. Common ingredients include conditioners such as cationic polymers and silicones (which coat the hair to add smoothness, volume and pliability), fragrance, and foaming and thickening agents.

Our trialists rated the salon brands neither better nor worse than almost all the brands bought in supermarkets for clean washing or fragrance, but the salon products in general were thought to have a slightly thicker consistency and a slightly thinner lather — which might be one reason our trialists didn't like them as much: in general they preferred a

WHAT TO BUY

	Price per 100 mL*
CLAIROL Herbal Essences	$1.57
SCHWARZKOPF Extra Care	$1.89
ORGANICS Moisturising	$1.78
SUNSILK Maximum Shine	$1.71

* *Based on the price we paid in June 2001.*

Shampoo feels like conditioner?

Several trialists commented that some shampoos made their hair feel as if it had been conditioned as well as washed. That's probably because they also contained a conditioner of some kind.

The detergent in a shampoo washes the hair clean, but it also strips it of sebum, the hair's natural moisturiser and conditioner. As 'squeaky clean' hair can be difficult to comb and style, many shampoos also contain some conditioners, to make it more manageable.

Conditioners stick to the outside layer of the hair (cuticle), smoothing it down so the hairs are less likely to get caught on each other. Some are particularly useful for dry, chemically treated or damaged hair, because they leave a film on the part of the hair where it's most damaged, 'mending' it temporarily. Others are useful to add 'body' (see *Marketing speak*, above right).

Conditioners typically contain oils and other substances that replace the hair's sebum: silicones (lubricants), humectants (to attract water to the hair and make it more flexible) and quaternary ammonium compounds (to make hair easier to comb).

LITE WEIMANN

thicker lather. Only one made it into their top 10: **PAUL MITCHELL Awapuhi** at $4 per 100 mL.

A concentrated salon product may last longer because you need less, and it should suit your hair and scalp if the hairdresser's recommended it. Keep in mind, though, that the choice of products available at the salon may limit what's available for them to recommend.

GOOD AND INEXPENSIVE

The trialists generally preferred shampoos with floral, fruity, coconut or sweet fragrances and disliked earthy, medicinal, tar/coal or bitter smells. Whether a man or woman trialled the shampoos made little difference to the verdict. The consistency had to be neither too thick and gluggy and hard to get out of the bottle, nor too thin and running straight through their fingers.

Some shampoos gave a better lather, smelt more appealing and left the hair feeling cleaner. The table on page 11 lists all shampoos trialled in rank order. The four in the *What to buy* list are profiled on page 10. They're all available from supermarkets and cost on average around $1.75 for 100 mL. Three more products are even cheaper, and still made it into the top 10 (**MELROSE Everyday Ginseng, REVLON New Flex** and **WELLA BALSAM Balancing**).

MARKETING SPEAK

Haircare products can make your hair feel and look better. Their formulations may be based on scientific research, but some of the claims are at best very creative interpretations of the science, or simply marketing hype. The points below can help you sort the facts from fiction.

- **Repairs split ends.** Conditioning agents can't repair hair that's broken. They can only cover up the damage and make it look and feel better by smoothing and sealing the hair's outside layer (cuticle) temporarily.
- **Volumises.** Shampoos can't really increase the volume of your hair, but can improve its 'body' and make it look more voluminous. Some ingredients can increase the surface charge of hair (one strand repels the next and the whole mass of hair appears to increase in volume), or coat the hair shaft to prevent it from going limp and help curls retain their bounce.
- **Revitalises, rejuvenates.** How can you revitalise something that's entirely made up of dead cells? If hair was 'alive', it couldn't be cut, heated or treated without causing pain. These two words are classic marketing speak: ignore them.
- **Removes 'build-up'.** The jury's still out about whether 'build-up' that normal shampoo can't remove is a real phenomenon, but some people think hair can suffer 'shampoo fatigue', when residues of styling and protection products build up and weigh hair down, making it look dull. Special 'clarifying' shampoos are claimed to remove the build-up and leave a shiny coating (which presumably in turn builds up, and so on ad infinitum). You can also remove it with a shampoo that doesn't contain a conditioning agent, such as a high-detergent one for oily hair — use a conditioner afterwards if it gets too difficult to comb.
- **Herbal** and **botanical extracts** are generally no better for hair than synthetically derived ingredients. Always check where the special ingredient is listed on the label: the further down the list, the smaller the quantity.
- **Proteins, vitamins** and **antioxidants** are important in your diet, but of little value in a shampoo; even less in the small quantities most of them contain.
- **Spring water.** Now why would you need that in a shampoo? Even if it had special qualities, you'd wash it right out under the shower, unless you rinse with spring water too!

CANCER-CAUSING?

You may have read on certain websites or received a warning by email that shampoos — and other products containing sodium lauryl sulphate (SLS) and sodium laureth sulphate (SLES) — can cause serious health problems after long-term use, including cancer, or increase your chances of getting Alzheimer's disease.

SLS and SLES are surfactants (detergents) added to personal care products to remove and emulsify grease from skin or hair. The former is more commonly used in toothpastes and mouthwashes because it's tasteless; SLES tastes soapy and tends to be used in shampoos because it's less irritating to the eyes.

These two chemicals are neither highly toxic nor good for you, but there's no evidence they can cause cancer. Prolonged exposure to them can lead to skin or eye irritation, chapping, cracking and dryness. So use them properly: don't leave them on for too long and rinse thoroughly.

Profiles

The top 15 shampoos in the table scored significantly better than average. The four in the *What to buy* list are profiled below with a selection of trialists' comments. They're available at supermarkets, variety stores or chemists for less than $2 per 100 mL.

CLAIROL HERBAL ESSENCES MOISTURE BALANCING FOR NORMAL HAIR

Price paid (per 100 mL): $1.57

- "Very pleasant smell of apples."
- "Seemed to be good all round."
- "A very nice shampoo overall: nice fragrance and not too overpowering, and manageable hair afterwards."

ORGANICS MOISTURISING SHAMPOO FOR NORMAL HAIR

Price paid (per 100 mL): $1.78

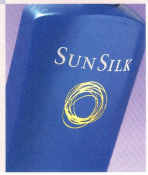
- "Very good lather, almost too much."
- "Good quality, good fragrance, overall nice shampoo."
- "Washes well, nice fragrance, hair feels good and blow-dries well."

PROFILES: VANESSA MARSHALL

SCHWARZKOPF EXTRA CARE VITAL NOURISHMENT SHAMPOO NORMAL HAIR

Price paid (per 100 mL): $1.89

- "My hair feels nice and silky and soft."
- "My hair felt clean and soft. It has an ideal consistency that clings to the hair but rinses out easily, lathers very well and has a soft, lingering fragrance."



SUNSILK MAXIMUM SHINE SHAMPOO FOR NORMAL HAIR

Price paid (per 100 mL): $1.71

- "Very pleasant smell, not overpowering."
- "A most luxuriant lather with very creamy and long-lasting bubbles."
- "This one was great. My hair feels soft and shiny. Everything it did was right."

MISSING IN ACTION

You might be wondering why we haven't included the top-scoring **VIDAL SASSOON** and top-selling **PANTENE** shampoos in the *What to buy* list. After all, the trialists liked the **VIDAL SASSOON** shampoo best and **PANTENE** holds the highest brand share — both by quite a margin.

You'd think these would be good reasons for the manufacturer and importer not to change these products, but marketing strategies involving 'new' or 'improved' products seem to have won the day.

Just as we went to press, Procter & Gamble told us its **PANTENE Pro-V** range had completely changed. "It made my hair feel very clean and silky; didn't feel like it had stripped it," said one of our trialists about the old **PANTENE Pro-V**. We wonder if she'll like the new **PANTENE Pro-V Classic Clean** shampoo just as much — it no longer contains any conditioning agents. But then, there's a separate conditioner in each of the "unique, end-look collections"...

And what about the top-scoring **VIDAL SASSOON**? "As we're moving into the new Pantene, we've discontinued it," Procter & Gamble told us. There may still be remaining stock on supermarket shelves, but the company no longer imports this brand. Will former **VIDAL SASSOON** users now buy **PANTENE**?

CHOICE HOME TESTER

The trial

Thanks to around 500 CHOICE Home Testers (about 75% women) who trialled 50 shampoos for normal hair or everyday use. Every trialist received five small bottles of shampoo marked only with a number, so brand knowledge wouldn't influence their judgment. They used one brand for two consecutive hair washes, washing either daily or every second day. Those who normally used other hair care or styling products continued to do so during the trial.

After the second wash, the trialists filled in a survey form, telling us how much they liked each shampoo and its fragrance and how clean it made their hair feel after washing; commenting on the shampoo's consistency and lather; and indicating whether they'd buy it again. They also rated each shampoo overall.

For each of these categories, trialists awarded a score, which we averaged and converted to a percentage. We've only printed the overall, washing and fragrance scores because trialists indicated these were the most important aspects of a shampoo.

Brand / product (in rank order)*	1 Overall score (%)	1 Clean washing score (%)	1 Fragrance score (%)	2 Salon / specialist shop	Price paid ($ per 100 mL)**
VIDAL SASSOON Normal Hair **(A)**	79	85	74		1.67
CLAIROL Herbal Essences	75	83	76		1.57
SCHWARZKOPF Extra Care	75	84	71		1.89
ORGANICS Moisturising	74	79	74		1.78
PANTENE Pro-V **(B)**	74	81	73		1.93
SUNSILK Maximum Shine	74	81	73		1.71
MELROSE Everyday Ginseng	73	83	64	**(D)**	0.72
REVLON New Flex	73	85	68		0.61
PAUL MITCHELL Awapuhi	72	83	66	✓	4.00
WELLA BALSAM Balancing	72	82	71		0.76
ANDREW COLLINGE Salon Solutions Revitalising	71	82	68		5.00
L'OREAL Kerastase Nutritive Satin Bath	71	79	64	✓	6.94
REDKEN CAT Revitalising	71	77	68	✓	5.48
WELLA DELVA Daily Use	71	78	74	✓	5.98
DAVID JONES Every Day	70	83	72		1.59
DECORE Normal	70	80	67		0.94
GOLDWELL Definition	70	76	72	✓	4.97
HELENE CURTIS Salon Selectives	70	77	71		0.95
ORGANIC CARE Normal Hair	70	78	67		0.74
PEARS Herbal Care	70	80	65		0.62
RPR My Revitalising	70	79	66	✓	3.98
AGREE For Normal Hair	69	78	71		0.63
ALBERTO VO5 **(C)**	69	77	65		0.96
JOICO Triage	69	79	66	✓	4.15
NATIO Gentle Daily	69	76	64		2.32
PURE ESSENCE Hydra Stabilising	69	81	54		1.66
FREEMAN Botanicals	68	78	65		1.98
NUTRIMETICS Active	68	80	70	**(E)**	2.00
PALMOLIVE Naturals Normal	68	76	74		0.84
CHARLES WORTHINGTON Results	67	80	66		4.28
HAIRDRESSER'S FORMULA Extra Body Building	67	77	67		1.60
SO Salon Only Gentle	65	78	65	✓	5.58
MATRIX ESSENTIALS Simply Clean	64	75	64	✓	3.98
NATURE'S ORGANICS Fruits Apple	64	78	65		0.41
CRABTREE & EVELYN Jojoba Oil	62	77	57		7.18
IGA Normal Care	62	76	59		0.58
AVON Herbal Care	61	75	65	**(E)**	1.48
PALMOLIVE Naturals Everyday	61	70	66		0.84
SCHWARZKOPF Professional Alternatives Gentle	61	77	68	✓	1.19
THE BODY SHOP Palmshine	60	79	50		4.78
SIMPLE Improved Frequent Use	59	74	52		3.82
ALCHEMY Rosemary	58	73	48	**(D)**	4.72
SALON ESSENTIALS Gentle Cleansing	58	71	62		0.40
SOUL PATTINSONS Family Use	56	67	63		0.38
THURSDAY PLANTATION Tea Tree	54	73	38		2.90
REDWIN Tea Tree	53	72	42		1.52
TEXTRA Everyday	52	69	57		0.20
CLINIQUE Haircare Daily	51	67	45		9.50
BLACK & GOLD With Extra Body	37	62	45		0.19
SAVINGS For Everyday Use	35	65	37		0.13

* *All shampoos tested are for normal hair or everyday use. Product names are shortened for space reasons.*

** *Prices are what we paid for the largest bottles we found in June 2001, converted to a unit price for 100 mL.*

(A) *This product has been discontinued, but you may still find it on supermarket shelves.*

(B) *This product has changed since our trial; the new Pantene shampoo has no conditioning agents.*

(C) *This formulation has changed slightly since our test.*

(D) *Available from healthfood shops.*

(E) *Available only direct from sales representatives.*

1 Scores

See *The trial*, below left, for information on the trial and scores. The top 15 shampoos in the table scored significantly better than average.

2 Salon or specialist shop product?

A tick in this column indicates the product is primarily available from salons or specialist shops, from healthfood shops or directly from sales representatives (**NUTRIMETICS** and **AVON**), as indicated. All the other products are available from supermarkets, variety stores, chemists, department stores or stores with the same name as the product.

PRIVATE HEALTH INSURANCE: guarantee or gamble?

Do you really get what you pay for?

IN A NUTSHELL

It's bad enough *to feel obliged by the Federal Government to take out private health insurance, but you'd at least expect to get your money's worth if you have to use it. It seems you can't be so confident.*

With a 30% government rebate for private health insurance, and penalties for high income earners who don't join up or people who join after 30, the Federal Government's carrot and stick approach to health insurance means many Australians have had little choice but to sign up.

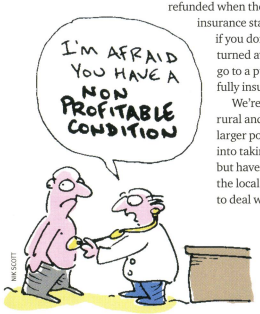
Of course the icing on this carrot cake is supposed to be that, should we ever need medical care, we can get it instantly in a private hospital even if it's elective treatment. Sounds like a good deal, right?

Some recent incidents where privately insured people have been turned away from private hospitals have us very concerned that people aren't getting what they've paid for — particularly older people who've been paying for private insurance for many years, and can't reap the benefits when they're most needed.

Pay upfront or go public

We've been told about a private hospital where patients have been asked for hundreds of dollars upfront (cash or credit card), including emergency cases. It's supposedly a 'security deposit' that's refunded when the patient's private health insurance status has been validated. However, if you don't have the money, you may be turned away and have no choice but to go to a public hospital — despite being fully insured.

We're also concerned that people in rural and regional areas, as well as some larger population centres, are being forced into taking up private health insurance, but have little opportunity to use it because the local private hospitals aren't equipped to deal with all medical contingencies.



MK SCOTT

Non-profitable patients need not apply

The state government and Australian Medical Association in Victoria are concerned that private hospitals are choosing to treat the most financially lucrative patients (such as young, healthy elective cases with a quick turnover) at the expense of older or chronically ill people, even emergency cases, who are being turned away and sent to public hospitals.

Still out of pocket

The government's $15 million "we're closing the gap" ad campaign may convince you that you'll no longer be out of pocket with private insurance. However, we've come across a couple of cases where private hospital policies still leave people out of pocket.

Early discharge means higher costs.

A CHOICE employee has had two hip replacement operations, several years apart, and had to pay more the second time round. This was because, being relatively young, she was discharged from her private hospital much more quickly than most hip-replacement patients, and overall more of her treatment — such as pre-operative xrays and post-operative physiotherapy — was provided to her as an outpatient.

The hospital wins because a bed is freed up for a more profitable patient, yet our colleague is out of pocket because outpatient costs aren't fully covered by private insurance.

Babies not included.

A subscriber told us that when she recently gave birth to her child in a private hospital, she couldn't claim the gap between the Medicare rebate and the Schedule fee for basic paediatric services — because her healthy baby was considered an outpatient. While there wasn't a great deal of money involved, our reader wants to warn others that you may be up for some unexpected costs.

Tell us about it

We want to know how widespread these problems are, so if you (or someone close to you) have had experiences with scenarios like those outlined here, we'd like to hear about them. Please write to us at **Private health**, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, fax us on (02) 9577 3377, or email privatehealth@choice.com.au. ■

QANTAS AIRWAYS LIMITED

UPDATE: Travel insurance

New Best Buys for the Christmas travel season.

Overseas travel may not be a preferred activity for some people at the moment, but if you do go, events like a broken leg on a mountain hike in New Zealand or a stolen purse in southern Italy do happen. Travel insurance gives you some protection when they do.

We've carefully checked the fine print of all the policies we assessed to find out exactly what you're covered for. For example, some insurers don't cover cash. Those that do have limits of $200 to $700 on a duo/family policy, and in most cases only provide cover when 'on person'.

The most important part of your policy is the medical cover because of the potentially high costs, especially if emergency evacuation is necessary.

In countries that have a reciprocal agreement with Medicare (Finland, Ireland, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden and the UK) you have some medical cover without insurance — usually for immediately necessary medical and public hospital treatment. For more information contact Medicare on 13 20 11.

While most travel insurers cover treatment in a private hospital in these countries, some do so only in 'special circumstances'. We've therefore picked different Best Buys for European countries with a reciprocal agreement and for other countries in Europe. If you want to travel all over Europe, the **AUSTRALIAN UNITY/ INSUTRAVEL Worldwide** plan is a Best Buy for both areas.

WHAT'S A BEST BUY?

All our Best Buys have a good policy and a competitive price. We looked at the plans the insurer recommends for each destination. If you want higher cover you might be able to buy a different plan for a higher premium. As well as good medical and other cover, all Best Buys have:

- Nil excess, or an excess buyout (you pay a fee so that you don't have to pay an excess if you make a claim).
- Cover for collision damage excess for a rental car is included or available for an extra premium.
- Medium baggage cover: at least $2000 single and $4000 for duo/family for travel to Bali and south-east Asia; $5000 single and $10,000 for duo/family for travel to Europe or worldwide. ('Duo' Best Buys cover two people travelling together.)
- Cancellation cover in case of retrenchment.

Best Buys for a family additionally provide cover for:

- At least six or an unlimited number of dependent children under 21 included in the family policy without an additional premium.
- Medical complications in a pregnancy that was unknown at the time the policy was issued.

The Best Buys for travel for three and 12 months are suitable for a backpacker on a working holiday, as they provide cover during working hours.

SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS

If you have special requirements you need to be even more careful when choosing your policy.

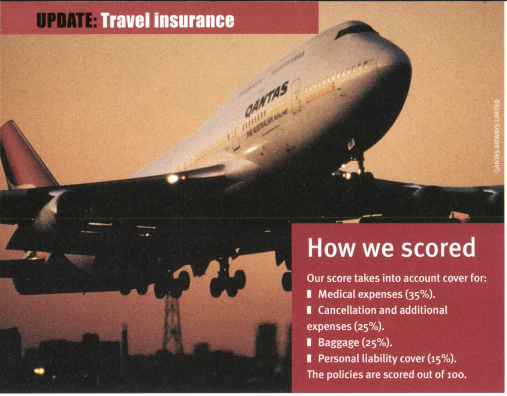
- **Older travellers:** Most policies have an age limit. If you're over 70, you usually need to undergo a medical assessment and you'll probably have to pay a higher premium.
- **Pre-existing medical conditions:** These are usually only covered on a case-by-case basis. Apply early so you can try other insurers if the first one doesn't want to cover you.
- **Single parents:** Check whether your children are covered under a single policy.
- **Pregnant women:** No policy covers full-term birth, but most cover unforeseen complications. However, they usually place a restriction on the time period. Cover may be on application only and you may have to pay an extra premium.
- **Adventure travel:** Make sure the activities you're planning are covered.

And in light of recent events, you might want to ask if you'll be covered if the airline defaults.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **We rated 68 travel insurance plans** *from 14 insurers to find the Best Buys.*
- **For our comprehensive** *travel insurance buying guide plus an interactive policy picker covering all destinations, go to www.choice.com.au and type 'travel insurance tour guide' in the search box. You can also find the buying guide in CHOICE, November 2000. If you don't have Web access we'll be happy to send you a copy — contact us on (02) 9577 3399.*

UPDATE: Travel insurance



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

How we scored

Our score takes into account cover for:

- Medical expenses (35%).
- Cancellation and additional expenses (25%).
- Baggage (25%).
- Personal liability cover (15%).

The policies are scored out of 100.

Insurer contacts

We surveyed 14 insurers, covering 68 insurance plans. Each insurer offers a series of different plans for different destinations. For example, in many cases different plans apply to Bali and Indonesia from other countries in south-east Asia.

- **AFTA** (from QBE). Available through **AFTA** travel agents; phone 1300 555 017.
- **AUSSIETRAVELCOVER** (from AIG). Available through travel agents; phone 1800 888 448 or (02) 9979 8888 in Sydney, or go to www.aussietravelcover.com.au.
- **AUSTRALIAN UNITY** (from American International Assurance Company Australia Ltd). Available direct from **AUSTRALIAN UNITY** and via its agents; phone 13 29 39 or go to www.austunity.com.au.
- **COVER-MORE** (from QBE). Available direct or via travel agents; phone 1300 728 822 or go to www.covermore.com.au.
- **HARVEY WORLD TRAVEL** (from QBE). Available through **HARVEY WORLD TRAVEL** agents; phone 1300 555 017.
- **HBF**. Available direct and through travel agents; phone 1800 198 066 or go to www.hbf.com.au.
- **INSUTRAVEL** (from American International Assurance Company Australia Ltd). Available through travel agents; phone 1800 333 613.
- **JETSET TRAVEL** (from QBE). Available through **JETSET TRAVEL** network; phone 1300 555 017 or go to www.jetset.com.au.
- **MBF**. Available direct; phone 13 11 37 or go to www.mbf.com.au.
- **READY PLAN** (from QBE). Available through travel agents; phone 1300 555 017.
- **SMART COVER** (from Australian Unity General Insurance). Available through travel agents and insurance brokers; phone 1800 812 426.
- **ST GEORGE BANK** (from CGU). Available from **ST GEORGE** branches, by phone on 13 35 55 or go to www.stgeorge.com.au.
- **STA** (from QBE). Available through **STA** travel agents; phone 1300 555 017 or go to www.statravel.com.au.
- **TRANSPORT INDUSTRIES INSURANCE** (from QBE). Available through travel agents or direct; phone 1800 335 200 or (03) 8602 9999 in Melbourne, or go to ww.qbe.com.au.

Due to the unrest overseas, **ZURICH FINANCIAL SERVICES AUSTRALIA** has suspended the sale of new travel insurance policies. Current policyholders are still covered.

COMPREHENSIVE and **WORLDCARE** were unable to give us information for this update as their policies are currently undergoing changes. We'll include their plans in our online policy picker as soon as they're available.

Best Buys

BALI/INDONESIA AND PACIFIC

10 DAYS

Single traveller

HBF Budget: $60 (A) ($0 excess) (B), 64 points.

AUSTRALIAN UNITY South West Pacific: $61 (C) ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 59 points.

INSUTRAVEL South West Pacific: $61 ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 59 points.

ST GEORGE Travel Protect Economy Plan (D): $63 ($0 excess) (B), 56 points.

Two people or a family travelling together

HBF Budget: $110 (A) ($0 excess) (B), 64 points.

AUSTRALIAN UNITY South West Pacific: $116 (C) ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 59 points.

INSUTRAVEL South West Pacific: $116 ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 59 points.

ST GEORGE Travel Protect Economy Plan (D): $122 ($0 excess) (B), 56 points.

OTHER SOUTH-EAST ASIA

For example, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, Philippines.

10 DAYS

Single traveller

HBF Super: $91 (E) ($0 excess) (B), 71 points.

ST GEORGE Travel Protect Standard Plan: $89 ($0 excess) (B), 58 points.

STA Policy B Asia: $83 ($50 excess or $10 excess buyout), 58 points.

AUSTRALIAN UNITY Asia Pacific: $72 (C) ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 55 points.

INSUTRAVEL Asia Pacific: $72 ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 55 points.

Two people or a family travelling together

HBF Super: $165 (E) ($0 excess) (B), 71 points.

AUSTRALIAN UNITY Asia Pacific: $136 (C) ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 55 points.

INSUTRAVEL Asia Pacific: $136 ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 55 points.

WORLDWIDE/USA

28 DAYS

Single traveller

HBF Gold: $209 (F) ($0 excess) (B), 86 points.
STA Policy A+ North America: $200 ($100 excess or $10 excess buyout), 79 points.
AUSTRALIAN UNITY Worldwide: $180 (C) ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 78 points.
INSUTRAVEL Worldwide: $180 ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 78 points.
TRANSPORT INDUSTRIES International Plan A: $189 ($0 excess) (B), 74 points.

Two people or a family travelling together

HBF Gold: $380 (F) ($0 excess) (B), 86 points.
AUSTRALIAN UNITY Worldwide: $350 (C) ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 78 points.
INSUTRAVEL Worldwide: $350 ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 78 points.
TRANSPORT INDUSTRIES International Plan A: $361 ($0 excess) (B), 74 points.

3 MONTHS

Single traveller

HBF Gold: $394 (F) ($100 excess or $25 excess buyout), 86 points.
STA Policy A+ North America: $374 ($100 excess or $10 excess buyout), 79 points.
AUSTRALIAN UNITY Worldwide: $344 (C) ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 78 points.
INSUTRAVEL Worldwide: $344 ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 78 points.

12 MONTHS

Single traveller

AUSTRALIAN UNITY Worldwide: $876 (C) ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 78 points.
INSUTRAVEL Worldwide: $876 ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 78 points.

(A) *$54 single, $99 duo/family for HBF health insurance policyholders.*
(B) *Our scenario falls in the policy's excess-free period.*
(C) *10% premium discount for existing customers of Australian Unity.*
(D) *Only for Bali, as St George doesn't recommend this policy for the rest of Indonesia.*
(E) *$81 single, $149 duo/family for HBF health insurance policyholders.*
(F) *For 28 days: $188 single, $342 duo/family; for 3 months: $355 single, for HBF health insurance policyholders.*
(G) *$355 for HBF health insurance policyholders.*

EUROPE

Countries with a reciprocal agreement with Medicare (UK, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Finland, Sweden, Netherlands)

28 DAYS

Single traveller

AUSTRALIAN UNITY Worldwide: $180 (C) ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 80 points.
INSUTRAVEL Worldwide: $180 ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 80 points.
ST GEORGE Travel Protect Super Plan: $198 ($0 excess) (B), 73 points.

Two people or a family travelling together

AUSTRALIAN UNITY Worldwide: $350 (C) ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 80 points.
INSUTRAVEL Worldwide: $350 ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 80 points.
ST GEORGE Travel Protect Super Plan: $381 ($0 excess) (B), 73 points.

3 MONTHS

Single traveller

AUSTRALIAN UNITY Worldwide: $344 (C) ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 80 points.
INSUTRAVEL Worldwide: $344 ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 80 points.
ST GEORGE Travel Protect Super Plan: $385 ($100 excess or $10 excess buyout), 73 points.

12 MONTHS

Single traveller

AUSTRALIAN UNITY Worldwide: $876 (C) ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 80 points.
INSUTRAVEL Worldwide: $876 ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 80 points.
ST GEORGE Travel Protect Super Plan: $1004 ($100 excess or $10 excess buyout), 73 points.

OTHER EUROPE

For example, Germany, France, Spain, Greece, eastern Europe and former USSR.

28 DAYS

Single traveller

HBF Gold: $209 (F) ($0 excess) (B), 86 points.
AUSTRALIAN UNITY Worldwide: $180 (C) ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 80 points.
INSUTRAVEL Worldwide: $180 ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 80 points.
AFTA Policy A: $188 ($0 excess) (B), 78 points.
JETSET Policy A: $188 ($0 excess) (B), 78 points.
READY PLAN Policy A: $188 ($0 excess) (B), 78 points.
HARVEY WORLD TRAVEL Super Plus: $186 ($0 excess) (B), 76 points.

Two people or a family travelling together

HBF Gold: $380 (F) ($0 excess) (B), 86 points.
AUSTRALIAN UNITY Worldwide: $350 (C) ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 80 points.
INSUTRAVEL Worldwide: $350 ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 80 points.
AFTA Policy A: $366 ($0 excess) (B), 78 points.
JETSET Policy A: $366 ($0 excess) (B), 78 points.
READY PLAN Policy A: $366 ($0 excess) (B), 78 points.
HARVEY WORLD TRAVEL Super Plus: $362 ($0 excess) (B), 76 points.

3 MONTHS

Single traveller

HBF Gold: $394 (G) ($100 excess or $25 excess buyout), 86 points.
AUSTRALIAN UNITY Worldwide: $344 (C) ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 80 points.
INSUTRAVEL Worldwide: $344 ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 80 points.

12 MONTHS

Single traveller

AUSTRALIAN UNITY Worldwide: $876 (C) ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 80 points.
INSUTRAVEL Worldwide: $876 ($50 excess or $15 excess buyout), 80 points.
AFTA Policy A: $999 ($100 excess or $25 excess buyout), 78 points.
JETSET Policy A: $999 ($100 excess or $25 excess buyout), 78 points.
READY PLAN Policy A: $999 ($100 excess or $25 excess buyout), 78 points.
HARVEY WORLD TRAVEL Super Plus: $991 ($100 excess or $25 excess buyout), 76 points.

BEN ROSATTO

Any old BEEF?

Ever wondered why you can't rely on consistent quality in beef?

IN A NUTSHELL

A lot of 'prime' beef *cuts sold in Australia come from older cows — which is why they're pretty hard to chew sometimes. A labelling system is needed that lets you know what you're getting before you buy.*

Do you ever wonder why you can get beef that melts in your mouth one day, but when you go back to buy more it'll be tough and tasteless? Inconsistent beef quality is something Australian consumers have had to put up with for some time.

It's also an issue many in the beef industry have been trying to address, viewing inconsistency as one of the main reasons Australian consumers may not be coming back for more — the per capita consumption of beef here is relatively low.

The animal's age is the most significant factor in varying beef quality. While the species of cattle, the region in which it was bred and whether it was raised on pasture or in a feedlot also contribute to quality, if it's over three years old you can bet it's getting pretty tough on your jaw.

PROOF OF AGE

The beef industry usually checks the age of cattle by the number of teeth they have. If an animal is over three years old it has eight permanent incisor teeth. Major meat processors in Australia estimate that around 30-40% of the beef sold domestically is from cows with eight teeth, and most of this ends up as 'prime cuts'.

The US, on the other hand, gets its table beef (beef cuts to cook at home, rather than canned or processed beef) from animals with an average age of 22 months. There, cows with eight permanent incisors are used almost entirely for processed beef, including hamburgers and sausages. Consumers in the European Union, South Korea and Japan also eat better-quality meat, with import restrictions banning animals with more than four or six permanent incisors, depending on the country.

'BUDGET' = OLD?

So how can you tell your quality rump really is the quality you're after?

At the moment there's no real guarantee. Meat Livestock Australia introduced a system earlier this year that uses the word 'budget' on labels to indicate beef from older animals. Supermarkets including Bi-Lo, Coles, Franklins and Woolworths, as well as the Bush's chain of butchers, have signed up to use it. But it has drawbacks:

- Do many (any?) consumers know this is what 'budget' means? You'd expect 'budget' labels to be highlighting a bulk buy or other cost-effective cuts or packages.
- It has no legal enforceability, relying on industry to do the right thing.
- There are several exemptions from the 'budget' label, including tenderised and processed meats.

CHOICE thinks this labelling system is inadequate: the word 'budget' isn't enough by itself to let you know the meat you're buying is from older animals.

The federal agriculture minister, Warren Truss, also thinks the issue of beef labelling is a problem. He's asked the Red Meat Advisory Council (RMAC) to look into the issue. We hope this process won't just be for the benefit of the industry, but will also be open to consumer input.

NATIONAL STANDARD NEEDED

CHOICE thinks a national standard is needed and will be letting RMAC know. The standard should be overseen by the Australia New Zealand Food Authority (ANZFA) to ensure it's enforceable and that consumers have one central resource for information, separate from industry.

We need a comprehensive beef grading and labelling system that addresses age and other contributors to quality, including whether the cattle were raised on pasture or feedlot and levels of antibiotic and hormone content.

Australian consumers should have access to the best-quality food we produce. And when our table steak does come from old cows, we should be able to tell before we buy it. ■

VANESSA MARSHALL

HIGH QUALITY at a price

Digital camcorders offer high picture and sound quality, and features galore. But are they worth their high price?

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Digital camcorders** *produce much better image quality than conventional analogue systems, and are becoming ever smaller and more feature-packed.*
- **To really take advantage** *of what they have to offer, you also need a powerful computer and editing software (*Computer CHOICE, *November 2001, has a test of video editing software).*

WHAT TO BUY

SONY DCR-TRV900		$4899
SONY DCR-TRV30		$3629
PANASONIC NV-MX300A		$4999
SONY DCR-TRV828		$2699
PANASONIC NV-D538A	BEST BUY	$1979
SONY DCR-PC9		$3509

What comes to mind when you hear 'home video'? Boring, unedited, shaky, low-quality recordings taken with bulky camcorders? Well, digital camcorders could make you think again.

Modern digital models are small enough to fit into the pocket of a casual jacket, provide very good picture quality, allow easy and professional editing on your computer, and are packed with features and functions to spice up your recordings. If you can afford one.

You need to part with at least $1700 to buy one of the models in our test — considerably more than you have to spend on an analogue model (see *Camcorder systems*, page 19, for the differences between the various systems). Top-of-the range models cost as much as $5000.

Continued overleaf

WHAT YOU GET

- Picture quality that's clearly better than that of highband analogue systems (see far right).
- Potentially hifi-quality sound. However, only a few of the built-in microphones realise that potential — mainly because they can't avoid recording the running noise of the camcorder's motor. You can overcome that problem by using an external microphone (so make sure you get a model that allows you to connect one. Only the two JVC models in this test don't.)
- Amazingly small and lightweight camcorders packed with generally easy-to-use menu-controlled features and functions.
- The ability to play back your recordings on your TV, and to transfer them to a computer for near-professional editing (if you have the necessary software) without loss of quality. There's a test of video editing software in *Computer* CHOICE, November 2001 (call 1800 069 552 if you'd like to subscribe, or go to www.choice.com.au and type 'video editing' in the search box).
- The ability to use the camcorder as a digital still camera, and take photos either on the tape or on a separate memory system (see note 18, page 23, for details).

Continued on page 20

While all the tested models are quite compact, the difference between the largest (Sony DCR-TRV828, left) and the smallest (JVC GR-DVP3, right) is still considerable. However, if you're interested in a small model, make sure it's still comfortable to hold and allows easy access to the main controls at the same time.

FEATURES AND FUNCTIONS (ALMOST) ALL THE MODELS HAVE

Accessories

- Instruction manual.
- Lens protector.
- Lithium-ion battery.
- Remote control.
- Shoulder strap (except the **JVC GR-DVX78** and **SONY DCR-PC9**).
- Accessory shoe to attach things like an external microphone or video light (except the **HITACHIs, JVC GR-DVX78** and **SONY DCR-PC9**; you'll have to hold them).

Connections

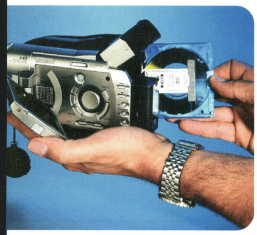
- Audio/video output and S-video output to play back recordings on your TV.
- Digital video output to transfer recordings to a computer for editing (except the **HITACHI DZ-MV100A**, which records on a DVD).
- Earphone output (except the **HITACHIs**). Earphones allow you to monitor the sound quality as it's recorded.

Displays

- Electronic viewfinder with colour display (except the **SONY DCR-TRV828**, which has a black-and-white display).
- LCD colour monitor.
- Clock and date.
- Remaining-tape indicator in minutes or bars.
- Remaining-battery indicator in minutes and/or bars.

Recording functions

- Motor zoom with variable speed, so you can zoom up and down at varying speeds by pressing a button.
- Autofocus and manual focus.
- Image stabilisation (see note 7, page 23, for details).
- Automatic fading: this function gradually fades out picture and sound, allowing better-quality editing.
- Automatic and manual (except the **HITACHI VM-D965LE**) exposure setting for video recordings. The manual function gives you more control over the amount of light entering the lens, and therefore more scope for creativity.
- Automatic shutter speed setting for photo recordings.
- Automatic and manual (except the **SONY DCR-TRV828**) white balance setting. This function adjusts the camcorder to the colour temperature of the environment you're filming in (for example, natural or artificial light) in order to obtain a natural colour balance. You're likely to use the manual setting only in extreme lighting situations.
- Automatic exposure programs for photo recordings. These pick a certain aperture and shutter speed for standard situations such as sports or portrait photos.
- Long-play mode. This lets you record at reduced speed so you can fit more on a tape. However, the picture quality won't be as good.
- Time code (except the **HITACHI VM-D965LE**): this feature gives each picture frame an invisible digital marking that allows you to edit very accurately.



STIFTUNG WARENTEST

The Hitachi DZ-MV100A records on a DVD (digital versatile disc) instead of tape. This makes it very convenient to transfer your recordings to a computer — if it has a DVD-RAM drive.

STIFTUNG WARENTEST

Playback modes

- Play, fast forward, rewind, stop, pause, cue-review, slow motion (except the **HITACHI VM-D965LE**), frame-by-frame (except the **HITACHI VM-D965LE**).
- Playback search modes (for example, to search for photos on the tape, or a certain date).
- Digital playback effects that can be applied to your recordings (for example, monochrome or negative).

Audio

- Volume-adjustable built-in speaker.
- Four audio tracks (except the **HITACHI DZ-MV100A**, which has only two), allowing you, for example, to record music and/or narration in addition to the original sound recordings.

Remote control

- At least play, fast-forward, rewind, stop, record, zoom, slow motion (except the **HITACHI VM-D965LE**) and frame-by-frame (except the **HITACHI VM-D965LE**).

Camcorder systems

If you want to buy a camcorder, you're faced with a range of different systems. Here's what's available.

Standard analogue systems

In terms of picture quality, these systems are outdated. They're only worth considering for their relatively low prices.

- **VHS:** Uses standard, comparatively cheap VHS cassettes, which has the advantage that you can play back your recordings on your TV by using a standard VHS VCR. However, it also makes the camcorders bulky and heavy. Only very few models are still available.
- **VHS-C:** Uses the same type of tape as VHS but in a smaller cassette, making VHS-C camcorders more compact. If you want to play back your recordings on your TV via a VCR, you need to insert the VHS-C cassette into an adaptor the size of a standard VHS cassette. Only very few VHS-C models are still available.
- **Video 8:** Uses a different type of tape from VHS camcorders (8 mm wide instead of 0.5 inch/12.7 mm), allowing for smaller cassettes and camcorders. The disadvantage: you can't play back your recordings on your TV by using a VCR, but need to connect the camcorder to a suitable TV.

Highband analogue systems

All three standard analogue systems are available in highband versions. While the picture quality of these systems is significantly better than that of standard systems, it's still a far cry from digital quality.

- **S-VHS:** Uses higher-quality S-VHS tape. Like VHS camcorders, S-VHS models are relatively bulky and heavy. The tape can't be played back on your TV by using a standard VHS VCR. You need an S-VHS VCR, or to connect the camcorder to a suitable TV.

  You can play back VHS and VHS-C (in their adaptor) cassettes in S-VHS camcorders and VCRs. Only very few S-VHS camcorders are available.
- **S-VHS-C:** Uses the same quality tape as S-VHS but in a smaller cassette, making S-VHS-C camcorders more compact. You can play back your recordings on your TV via an S-VHS VCR (using an adaptor), or by connecting the camcorder to a suitable TV. You can also play back VHS-C cassettes via an S-VHS-C camcorder.
- **Hi 8:** Uses higher-quality 8 mm tape. You can't play back your recordings on your TV via a VCR, but need to connect the camcorder to a suitable TV. You can play back Video 8 tapes via a Hi 8 camcorder.

Digital systems

These give by far the best picture and sound quality, copying without quality loss, and easier, more sophisticated editing using computer software. See *Which connection?*, page 20, for details of how to view and edit your recordings.

- **Mini DV:** Incompatible with any of the other systems. Small cassettes (with 60 minutes' running time) allow extremely compact camcorders. Using suitable connections, you can transfer your recordings onto a computer for editing or watching, or play them back on your TV.
- **Digital 8:** Uses the analogue Hi 8 tape, but digital recording technology, reducing the normal running time of the Hi 8 cassette from 60 to 40 minutes. Using suitable connections, you can transfer your recordings onto a computer for editing or watching, or play them back on your TV.

  You can also play back Hi 8 and Video 8 tapes with analogue recordings via a Digital 8 camcorder.
- **DVD:** Uses a digital versatile disc (DVD) with about 60 minutes' running time instead of a tape. There's currently only one DVD camcorder on the market (**HITACHI DZ-MV100A**). Accessing recorded scenes is much quicker than by winding a tape. If your computer has a DVD-RAM drive (a normal DVD drive won't do), viewing or transferring your recordings is very easy and quick. If not, you have to use the comparatively slow USB connection, because the **HITACHI** doesn't have a DV connection. If you want to play back recordings on your TV, it needs to have a suitable connection.

From page 18

WHICH CONNECTION?

TV

Playing back your recordings on a TV requires the digital video to be translated into analogue signals, which means a loss of quality.

All the models have a standard audio/video (AV) output and come with an AV cable you can connect to your TV. They also have a higher-quality super-video (S-video) output. But you need a TV or VCR with S-video input, and only a few of the tested camcorder models come with an S-video cable, so you'd need to buy one as an extra.

Computer

You can transfer your recordings digitally to your computer without loss of quality.

All the tested models (except the **HITACHI DZ-MV100A**, which records on a digital versatile disc — DVD) have a digital video (DV, i.Link or 'firewire') output, but only a few are sold with a DV cable. This is currently the fastest data transfer option. However, you need a powerful computer and special software to use it. (Minimum specs for your computer: Pentium 2; 233 MHz processor; 64 Mb RAM; Windows 98 Special Edition; PCI slot; 20 Gb, 7200 rpm hard drive that can transfer data at 3.6 Mb per second.)

All but the **SHARP VL-WD650E** and the **HITACHIs** also have a DV input, which means you can also transfer your edited recordings from the computer back onto tape and use it in your camcorder.

If you can't use the DV connection, the more common USB port is the next best option; a serial PC connection the slowest (only suitable for the transfer of still photos). The table, page 23, shows you which models offer which connection. All the models with a USB output also have a USB input, so you can transfer back your edited recordings.

Profiles

Models in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order from left to right. Prices shown are recommended retail, as provided by manufacturers in Septemb

SONY DCR-TRV900

Price: $4899

GOOD POINTS

- Equal-best picture quality. A factor of this may be that it has three CCDs: a charge-coupled device is a chip that turns pictures into digital signals. Most of the tested models have only one chip processing all colours. Three CCDs process one colour each (red, green, blue), resulting in better picture quality.
- Best sound quality overall and with built-in microphone.
- Easiest to use.
- Best autofocus.
- The most versatile.
- Equal-best image stabiliser.
- Relatively large LCD monitor.
- Interval recording, which allows you to make time-lapse recordings — for example, of an opening flower — by recording the same object for, say, a few seconds every few minutes.

BAD POINTS

- Comparatively low battery operating time.
- External battery charger costs extra.
- No USB or PC serial output.
- Very expensive.

SONY DCR-TRV828

Price: $2699

GOOD POINTS

- Equal-best image stabiliser.
- Very long battery operating time.
- Relatively large LCD monitor.

BAD POINTS

- External battery charger costs extra.
- Autofocus quality relatively poor in low-light conditions.
- Black-and-white viewfinder.

PANASONIC NV-DS38A

Price: $1979

A good performer throughout with all the important features and functions, and without any outstanding good or bad points.

BEST BUY

PROFILES: SYTPHON MARKTEST

What to look for

If you think a digital camcorder is for you, consider the following before you buy:

- Which system do you want (see *Camcorder systems*, page 19, for the differences)? For example, if you've already used a Video 8 or Hi 8 camcorder, you may prefer a Digital 8 model, because you'll be able to play your old tapes on it.
- Go to a shop and try out the models you're interested in. Check whether you can comfortably hold them and reach the main controls (such as the zoom and the record button) at the same time.
- Think about what features and functions you need, and make sure the model you're interested in has them all. Some models are packed with features you may never use, so there's no point paying for them.
- Think about which connections to your TV and computer you'll use, and make sure the model you're interested in has them. Get all the necessary cables when buying the camcorder.
- An external microphone usually provides much better sound quality than a built-in one. So make sure the camcorder you're interested in allows you to connect one.
- If you're planning to film a lot, you may prefer a camcorder that allows you to remove the battery and charge it in a separate charger, rather than having to hook up the whole camcorder to the power supply.

STYLING WARDHTEST

The multi-function button on the Hitachi VM-D965LE is awkward to use, as it's easy to select the wrong function.

01.

SONY DCR-TRV30

Price: $3629

GOOD POINTS

- Equal-best image stabiliser.
- Very long battery operating time.
- Relatively large LCD monitor.
- Interval recording.

BAD POINTS

- External battery charger costs extra.

PANASONIC NV-MX300A

Price: $4999

GOOD POINTS

- Equal-best picture quality; like the **SONY DCR-TRV900**, it has three CCDs.
- Best recording quality in both daylight and artificial light.

BAD POINTS

- Autofocus quality relatively poor, particularly in low-light conditions.
- Very expensive.

SONY DCR-PC9

Price: $3509

GOOD POINTS

- Equal-best image stabiliser.
- Very compact and lightweight.
- Interval recording.

BAD POINTS

- Sound quality of recordings using the built-in microphone is comparatively poor.
- No external battery charger.
- No shoulder strap.
- No accessory shoe for attaching things like an external microphone or video light, so you have to hold them separately.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

- On all the other models (except the **HITACHI VM-D965LE**), the built-in microphone produces comparatively poor sound quality. This is particularly critical for the **JVC** models, as you can't connect an external microphone (which usually improves sound quality dramatically).
- The **JVC** models (together with the **SHARP VL-WD650E**) also have by far the worst image stabilisation of the tested models.
- The **HITACHI VM-D965LE** is the least versatile, yet the most difficult model to use.
- The **CANON DM-MV300** was included in our test, but was discontinued before publication.

Brand / model (in rank order)	PERFORMANCE 1 Overall score (%)	2 Picture quality score (%)	3 Sound quality score (%)	4 Ease of use score (%)	5 Autofocus score (%)	6 Versatility score (%)	7 Image stability score (%)	8 Battery operating time (min)	FEATURES 9 External battery charger
SONY DCR-TRV900	87	89	85	79	94	91	82	85	**(B)**
SONY DCR-TRV30	82	83	80	78	85	87	82	168	**(B)**
PANASONIC NV-MX300A	81	89	78	70	93	79	56	133	✓
SONY DCR-TRV828	81	83	78	77	81	86	82	151	**(B)**
PANASONIC NV-DS38A	79	80	75	76	91	85	66	117	✓
SONY DCR-PC9	78	81	67	72	91	85	82	99	
SHARP VL-ME100E	74	86	55	67	81	77	78	112	✓
HITACHI DZ-MV100A	71	78	56	74	77	64	71	116	✓
HITACHI VM-D965LE **(A)**	71	80	74	58	83	55	65	71	
JVC GR-DVX78	69	74	59	69	80	74	42	67	
SHARP VL-WD650E	67	72	54	70	73	74	49	131	✓
JVC GR-DVP3	64	71	48	62	80	75	42	85	✓

SANYO IDC-1000Z

This model (RRP: $2999) is somewhere between a digital camera and a digital camcorder. So while we applied the same test program to it as to the camcorders, we can't directly compare it.

The **SANYO** uses a 730 MB photo disk to record photos, photo sequences (up to 13 shots in quick succession), short video clips and sound.

In the highest-quality setting, you can fit about 250 photos or eight minutes of video; in the lowest setting about 12,000 photos and 120 minutes of video.

The quality of photos is very good. However, the video recordings are of comparatively poor quality, especially when played back on a TV. The quality improves when they're transferred onto a computer, indicating a poor-quality AV output (which translates the digital into a TV's analogue signals).

The **SANYO**'s sound quality is extremely poor, whether you're using its built-in microphone or an external one.

Our verdict: The main reason to buy the **SANYO** is its huge memory, which allows you to record up to 12,000 photos. If you want to seriously record videos, you're better off with a proper camcorder.

STYLING: WARREN TEST

* *Recommended retail price, as provided by manufacturers in September 2001.*

(A) *The manufacturer says this model will be discontinued in December 2001.*

(B) *Available as an option.*

(C) *Special connection for a zoom microphone that comes as an accessory: it's designed to match the sound impression to the focal length you're using. If you're using the maximum focal length, the external 'zoom microphone' records very focused sound. If you're using the minimum focal length, the internal microphone records diffuse sound. Between these extremes, the camcorder adjusts the sound of both microphones corresponding to the zoom position. The feature works well.*

(D) *No infrared lamp, but a digital 'night scope' function claimed to boost the sensitivity at minimal lighting to produce full-colour recordings.*

(E) *All recordings are saved on a DVD and can be conveniently transferred to a computer if it has a DVD-RAM drive.*

Similar models

The **PANASONIC NV-DS28** ($1649) is similar to the **PANASONIC NV-DS38A** tested. Main difference: the **NV-DS28** doesn't have a memory card for photo recording.

The **SHARP VL-WD450E** ($1999) is similar to the **SHARP VL-WD650E** tested. Main difference: the **VL-WD450E** doesn't have a memory card for photo recording. The tested model is also similar to the **VL-WD250E** ($1749). Main differences: the **VL-WD250E** doesn't have a memory card for photo recording, PC cable and zoom microphone.

1 Overall score

The overall score is a combination of picture quality, sound quality, ease of use, autofocus, versatility and image stability, weighted as follows:

- Picture quality: 35%.
- Sound quality: 20%.
- Ease of use: 20%.
- Autofocus: 10%.
- Versatility: 10%.
- Image stability: 5%.

2 Picture quality score

The main picture quality assessments were:

- A viewing panel assessed the sharpness, colour and overall image quality of recordings in daylight and artificial light.
- Technical tests included resolution and light sensitivity.
- We assessed the quality of still photos recorded on tape and (where applicable) on separate memory (see note 18, right).

3 Sound quality score

A panel assessed the quality of speech and music recorded with the built-in

									SPECIFICATIONS								
output	11 Input for external microphone	12 Recording indicator light	13 Infrared lamp	14 Self-timer	15 Full auto recording	16 Manual shutter speed setting	17 Titles	18 Separate memory	19 System	20 Zoom factor optical / digital	Size of colour monitor (mm)	Dimensions (W x H x D; cm)	Weight (kg)	Origin	Warranty (years)	Manufacturer / distributor	Price ($)*
/ ✗	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	Floppy	Mini DV	12 / 48	72 x 50	10 x 11 x 20	1.0	Japan	1	Sony	4899
/ ✗	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	Stick	Mini DV	10 / 120	72 x 50	8 x 9 x 17	0.8	Japan	1	Sony	3629
/ ✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	Card	Mini DV	12 / 120	50 x 37	8 x 11 x 19	0.9	Japan	1	Panasonic	4999
/ ✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	Stick	Digital 8	18 / 500	72 x 50	10 x 11 x 23	1.1	Japan	1	Sony	2699
/ ✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	Card	Mini DV	15 / 600	50 x 38	9 x 10 x 18	0.7	Japan	1	Panasonic	1979
/ ✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	Stick	Mini DV	10 / 120	50 x 38	6 x 10 x 10	0.6	Japan	1	Sony	3509
/ ✓	**(C)**		✓	✓	✓	✓		Card	Mini DV	10 / 200	71 x 54	8 x 9 x 20	0.9	Japan	1	Sharp	3849
/ ✗	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	**(E)**	DVD (8 cm)	12 / 48	69 x 51	9 x 11 x 18	1.0	Japan	1	Hitachi	3999
/ ✗	✓	✓					✓		Digital 8	20 / 500	49 x 36	11 x 11 x 20	1.0	Japan	1	Hitachi	1699
/ ✗		✓	**(D)**		✓	✓		Card	Mini DV	10 / 200	50 x 40	6 x 12 x 11	0.6	Japan	1	Hagemeyer	2749
/ ✓	**(C)**		✓	✓	✓	✓		Card	Mini DV	26 / 780	60 x 43	10 x 12 x 19	0.9	Japan	1	Sharp	2099
/ ✗		✓	**(D)**		✓	✓		Card	Mini DV	10 / 100	40 x 31	5 x 12 x 8	0.4	Japan	1	Hagemeyer	3299

and (where applicable) an external microphone. We also measured the frequency response.

4 Ease of use score

A user panel assessed the instructions, the ease of various recording and playback functions, and the functionality of the viewfinder, LCD screen and remote control.

5 Autofocus score

We assessed the quality of focus during normal recording and recording under poor light conditions, as well as the speed of the autofocus system.

6 Versatility score

We assessed the camcorders against a list of more than 30 commonly found features and functions.

7 Image stabilisation score

On all the tested models you can activate a function that stabilises the picture in situations where you'd otherwise be likely to produce a shaky recording (for example, during telephoto recordings and slow pans). We checked how well the function works, and whether the stabilising effect has any negative impact on picture quality.

8 Battery operating time

We measured how long the models' rechargeable lithium-ion batteries lasted in a test cycle consisting of 20 times zooming across the full focal length range and back, and rewinding a 60-minute tape. The autofocus was switched on during the test, the LCD monitor switched off.

9 External battery charger

If you're filming a lot, it's important you can recharge the battery separately (models with a tick), and keep on using the camcorder with a spare battery. On models without a tick the battery has to be recharged while in the camcorder.

10 USB/PC serial output

See *Which connection?*, page 20, for details.

11 Input for external microphone

Connecting an external microphone usually improves the sound quality significantly.

12 Recording indicator light

This is important if you're using the remote control or self-timer, so you can see you're actually recording.

13 Infrared lamp

An infrared lamp allows you to make recordings in complete darkness. However, it doesn't work well with distant subjects (beyond about 3 m), and produces a monochrome (black-and-white or black-and-green) picture.

14 Self-timer

This feature allows you to start recording after a certain time — for example, if you want to film yourself.

15 Full auto recording

Point-and-shoot function where you don't have to worry about setting anything manually.

16 Manual shutter speed setting

Allows more creativity when taking photos.

17 Titles

Models with a tick in this column allow you to add programmed and/or individual titles to the recording.

18 Separate memory

With all the models you can also record still photos on the tape. However, searching for them can be a bit cumbersome, and you need a cable connection if you want to transfer them to a computer.

So most models also allow you to record photos on a separate memory medium (such as a 1.44 MB floppy disk, 4 MB memory stick or 8 MB memory card), allowing easier searching and transfer to a computer.

On some models, the quality is slightly worse than that of tape recordings, but still very good.

19 System

See page 19 for details.

20 Zoom factor optical / digital

The optical zoom factor describes what you're used to from photo cameras: you calculate it by dividing the lens's maximum focal length by its minimum focal length. The higher the factor, the bigger the zoom range. Within the limits of the lens, using the optical zoom won't decrease picture quality, and you can stabilise the picture with the image stabiliser.

With the digital zoom you can select a part of the picture and enlarge it digitally. The more you enlarge, the more grainy the picture gets. So while a digital zoom factor of 500 or more may sound impressive, don't expect a sharp recording of that faraway bird — your recording will look as if it's taken from a spy satellite.

What's the buzz on ELECTRIC TOOTHBRUSHES?

There's a surprisingly large price range, but is there much difference between them?

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Our trialists** *checked out nine widely available electric toothbrushes: seven rechargeable and two battery-operated. They reported quite a few shortcomings, but were enthusiastic about two models.*
- **The two best brushes** *overall were rated better than manual toothbrushes by most trialists, but what do the professionals reckon? See* Electric vs manual brushes, *right.*
- **Brushes powered** *by disposable batteries are very expensive to run — see* Ongoing costs, *right.*

Once the realm of orthodontic obsessives and technophiles, electric toothbrushes are commonplace these days — you can even buy them in supermarkets. But, as we discovered when we asked 17 people to try out nine models, there are big differences — and their performance doesn't necessarily reflect their price.

The best overall were the **BRAUN Oral-B 3D Excel Power** and **BRAUN Oral-B Plak Control**: trialists were generally impressed with their powerful but gentle clean, and nearly all thought they were better than a manual toothbrush. The more expensive **BRAUN Oral-B 3D Excel Power** ($119) has a timer (to tell you when you've brushed for long enough), a useful feature lacking in the **BRAUN Oral-B Plak Control**, but otherwise the two were rated equal, making the **BRAUN Oral-B Plak Control** a Best Buy at $40.

The main complaints regarding the other brushes were lack of power, particularly when pressure was applied; perceived ineffectiveness at cleaning; and discomfort caused by overly strong vibrations and harsh bristles. Some people also found the brush heads difficult to attach and/or remove.

ONGOING COSTS

It's worth considering the ongoing cost of electric toothbrushes. Two models (**REACH Powerbrush** and **COLGATE Actibrush**) could end up costing you around $48 and $18 a year respectively for disposable batteries for one person using them twice a day — which goes up to $192/$72 for a family of four. Rechargeable AA batteries would be cheaper in the long term.

On the other hand, most of the models with a built-in rechargeable battery will have to be replaced when their batteries no longer work, after two to five years of use; only the **MISTRAL** and **TIFFANY** have a replaceable NiCad battery. It may be possible to buy a replacement toothbrush without a recharger — if the model is still available years down the track.

BUT THERE'S MORE

Electric toothbrushes may feel as though they're giving you a thorough clean, and some come with so-called interdental brushes to get further into the nooks and crannies. Despite all this, you still have to floss. Too much hassle? Well, don't worry, you don't have to floss *all* your teeth — only the ones you want to keep!

What to look for

- **A timer** that tells you when two minutes are up will help ensure you brush effectively. The **BRAUN Oral-B 3D Excel Power** and **BRAUN Oral-B Plaque Remover 3D** have this feature.
- **A small brush head** allows you to reach all parts of your mouth.
- **Oscillating-rotating brushes,** or brushes that rotate back and forth, are preferable to those that simply vibrate. Sonic or ultrasonic brushes are considered a bit of a gimmick.
- **Rechargeable toothbrushes** are much more cost-effective than battery-operated — see *Ongoing costs*, below left).
- The cadmium in nickel cadmium (NiCad) batteries is toxic and they should be returned to the manufacturer for safe disposal when they die. Nickel metal hydride (NiMH) batteries don't contain toxic materials and can be disposed of in normal household waste.
- If you **run out of battery power** it's possible — if cumbersome — to use an electric toothbrush manually. Keep a few manual brushes on hand for such situations, and also for travelling.

Electric vs manual brushes

Electric toothbrushes may help your dental hygiene:

- Some have a two-minute timer that encourages you to brush for the recommended time.
- Their novelty and fun value may encourage kids — and some adults — to brush.
- They may be easier to operate for people with weak hands, arthritic pain or dexterity problems.
- They're useful for carers of people with a disability who can't brush their own teeth.

Potential disadvantages include:

- The expense of batteries in non-rechargeable models.
- Inconvenience if batteries run out — although you can still use it as a manual toothbrush.
- The cost of replacement heads — they range in price from about $2.50–$7.50 each, and it's recommended you replace them every three months. Availability may also be an issue — not all of them are easy to find in supermarkets.

WHICH IS BEST?

There's a growing body of research that shows some electric toothbrushes work better than manual toothbrushes. However, there are also plenty of studies that find no difference between them.

The Australian Dental Association says electric toothbrushes aren't necessarily better than their manual counterparts and, if used correctly, both will do the job adequately. The key here is 'used correctly', and since electric toothbrushes are designed to provide the ideal brushing technique, it should, in theory, be easier to use them correctly.

The bottom line is that if you're managing well with a manual toothbrush — that is, you have clean, healthy teeth and gums — an electric one may not offer much benefit.

PROFILES: VANESSA MARSHALL

What to buy

BRAUN ORAL-B 3D EXCEL POWER

Price: $119

Reasonably comfortable to grip, very easy to manoeuvre, head easy to attach and remove. Very powerful, cleans well and has a timer. But some trialists were put off by the two speed settings, saying the 'turbo' speed was too fast. And to get to the lower (generally preferred) speed, you have to push the control button twice, which some found inconvenient.

"The cleaning was definitely much better than a manual and also most other electric toothbrushes. I didn't like the noise it made, and didn't like the fastest of the two speeds — having to push the button twice before I could use the slower one was annoying."

BRAUN ORAL-B PLAK CONTROL

Price: $40

Very easy to operate and manoeuvre, one of the most comfortable to grip, the cleaning head is easy to attach and remove, and it's powerful but gentle on the mouth. A very effective cleaner.

"The brush was effective and easy to use – it felt like it gave a much better clean than a manual toothbrush."

BEST BUY

Brand / model (in rank order)	PERFORMANCE 1 User trial rating	2 Uses per charge (claimed / measured)	3 Shower test	4 Annual running cost ($)	FEATURES 5 Timer	Charging indicator light	Speeds	Charging unit wall-mountable	6 Pressure sensor	7 Indicator bristles	SPECIFICATION 8 Battery type
BRAUN Oral-B 3D Excel Power D17511	Good	22 / 29	Pass	31.60	✓	✓	2	✓	✓	✓	Rechargeable (NiM
BRAUN Oral-B Plak Control D8013	Good	14 / 20	Pass	31.80			1			✓	Rechargeable (NiCa
BLACK & DECKER Plaque Remover BPR100	OK	ns / 18	Pass	11.40		✓	1	✓			Rechargeable (NiCa
BRAUN Oral-B Plaque Remover 3D D15511	OK	22 / 34	Pass	32.00	✓	✓	1	✓	✓	✓	Rechargeable (NiM
REACH Powerbrush	OK	30 / 27	Pass	70.70 **(B)**		na	1	na			AA alkaline **(C)**
TIFFANY Power Plaque Remover DTB4 **(A)**	OK	12 / 15	Pass	12.60		✓	1	✓			Rechargeable (NiCa
COLGATE Actibrush Superior Clean	Borderline	180 / 143	Pass	40.10 **(B)**		na	1	na			AA alkaline **(C)**
MISTRAL Rechargeable Plaque Remover MPR200	Borderline	10 / 10	Pass	22.20		✓	1				Rechargeable (NiCa
RONSON Dental Brush – Plaque Remover 2HU1383	Borderline	12 / 9	Pass	17.50		✓	1	✓			Rechargeable (NiCa

What about the rest?

The brushes that didn't make it into our *What to buy* list were generally comfortable to grip, easy to manoeuvre and easy to operate, but were let down by other aspects of performance and use.

BRAUN ORAL-B PLAQUE REMOVER 3D

Price: $89

One of the noisiest in the trial and some felt the bristles were harsh against gums.

"A good brush. The timer is an important feature that helps get a better brush. Easy to use and gives a good clean."

TIFFANY POWER PLAQUE REMOVER*

Price: $20

Half rated this brush effective, half ineffective for cleaning. It was rated one of the poorer models for cleaning rear teeth, and some people had difficulties with the switch.

"Only main gripe was the awkward switch. Also, the rotation slowed under higher pressure. Otherwise it gave a good, fast clean."

"Am used to hard toothbrushes, so this one struck me as weak. It stopped quite often in difficult spots."

* *This model has been discontinued, but you may still find it in shops.*

BLACK & DECKER PLAQUE REMOVER

Price: $20

The head was easy to attach, but some found it difficult to remove. Almost half had problems with the power fading to some extent while in use, and while the majority felt it was effective at cleaning their teeth, a few thought it didn't clean very effectively.

"It was underpowered and cut out when angling between teeth. I would rather use my manual toothbrush than this."

REACH POWERBRUSH

Price: $27

There were very mixed feelings about this brush: some found the switch easy to use; some thought the vibrations were too strong, others that they were mild; many thought it was effective at cleaning, some fairly ineffective.

"Firm brush and action rate well, but the on-off switch and the brute strength needed to attach and remove the head count strongly against it."

COLGATE ACTIBRUSH SUPERIOR CLEAN

Price: $28

The main problem with this model was lack of power: almost half the trialists said it started to fade to some extent while they were using it.

"Not bad, but it wasn't as effective as I'd expect."

Full charge time (hours)	Brush heads supplied	Replacement brush head cost ($)*	Warranty (months)	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Price ($)*
16	1	7.50 **(F)**	12	Germany	Gillette	119
16	1	7.50 **(F)**	12	Germany	Gillette	40
24	4	2.50 **(F)**	12	China	Mistral	20
16	1	7.50 **(F)**	12	Germany	Gillette	89
na	2 **(E)**	5.50 **(G)**	**(H)**	Thailand	Johnson & Johnson	27
16	4	2.50 **(F)**	12	China	GAF Control	20
na	1	5.50 **(G)**	6	China	Colgate-Palmolive	28
24	4	5.00 **(G)**	24	China	Mistral	60
16	4	3.75 **(F)**	12	China	Housewares International	30

* *Prices given are recommended retail.*
ns *Not stated.*
na *Not applicable.*
(A) *This model has been discontinued, but you may still find it in stores.*
(B) *This is the cost when using disposable alkaline batteries; using rechargeable batteries would substantially reduce the ongoing costs, although would involve the one-off cost of batteries and a recharger (if you don't already have one).*
(C) *Can also use rechargeable AA batteries.*
(D) *Can also use AA alkaline batteries, and the NiCad battery can be replaced.*
(E) *One round brush head and one rectangular.*
(F) *Price per brush based on a pack of four brushes.*
(G) *Price per brush based on a pack of two brushes.*
(H) *No warranty — the Customer Service Centre assesses queries on a case-by-case basis.*

MISTRAL RECHARGEABLE PLAQUE REMOVER

Price: $60

The main complaints about this brush were that it's harder to use than others and felt ineffective at cleaning. Almost half the trialists thought the vibrations were strong and the brush harsh against their gums, and half reported noticeable fading of the power.

"This toothbrush was too difficult to use effectively, mostly due to its excessive shaking."

RONSON DENTAL BRUSH – PLAQUE REMOVER

PROFILES: VANESSA MARSHALL

Price: $30

One of the least popular brushes on test, with over half the trialists saying it was ineffective at cleaning their teeth. About half also found the vibrations on their teeth were strong and the brush harsh on their gums. Some also noted the power faded to some extent while in use.

"Weak oscillations of the head made this an ineffective toothbrush. It was chunky, loud, harsh on gums, and its overall power and speed seemed ineffective."

1 User trial rating

We recruited 17 people, of whom nine usually used an electric and eight a manual toothbrush. Each trialist rated six toothbrushes, with a total of 11 or 12 people commenting on each brush. Trialists were asked to give an overall rating for the toothbrushes, after assessing:

- Ease of use.
- Comfort and manoeuvrability.
- How well it cleaned.
- How it compared to a manual toothbrush.

2 Uses per charge

This is the number of times you can use the brush before its batteries need recharging, or replacing if they're non-rechargeable.

3 Shower test

As some people clean their teeth in the shower, we tested the toothbrushes under shower water flow for two minutes while they were running, and inspected the battery cavity where possible for water entry. We also submerged them briefly (to simulate their being dropped in the bath) and retested their running performance.

4 Annual running cost

The approximate cost of electrical power or alkaline batteries plus brush heads for one year, based on one user brushing for two minutes twice a day and replacing the brush heads every three months as recommended. If more than one person is using the brush, multiply the cost by the number of users for an approximate total cost.

There's also the longer-term cost of replacing a rechargeable toothbrush, which you may have to do when the battery is spent after two to five years — see *Ongoing costs*, page 24.

5 Timer

The timer memorises the elapsed time while you're brushing, and pulsates at two-minute intervals to indicate the minimum time you should brush for.

6 Pressure sensor

Some toothbrushes are designed to cut out or stop oscillating when pressed too hard against teeth and gums, preventing excessive pressure and potential damage or injury.

7 Indicator bristles

Some brushes have coloured bristles that fade with use, indicating it's time to replace the brush head.

8 Battery type

The **REACH** and **COLGATE** instructions recommend you use alkaline batteries, although you can also use AA-size NiMH or NiCad rechargeable batteries and a charger. See *What to look for*, page 25, for more on the different batteries.

Preventing CAR THEFT

A car is stolen every four minutes in Australia. How can you decrease the chance that yours is one of them?

IN A NUTSHELL

- **An immobiliser** *is the best protection you can get for your car.*
- *The* **CAR-SAFE Immobilise Now!** *program offers discounted standards-approved models, installed by a registered installer — see far right.*
- **When buying a used car,** *make sure it wasn't stolen.*

In 1999–2000, more than 145,000 cars were stolen in Australia — that's about one every four minutes, and only one of the sometimes surprising statistics on car theft (see the *Car theft stats*, below, for more).

PREVENT YOUR CAR FROM BEING STOLEN

Here's what you can do to protect your car from becoming a statistic:

- **Immobiliser**: An immobiliser interrupts the power supply to two or more systems required to start your car's engine. See *How an immobiliser works*, right, for details.

It's the best protection you can get for your car, and many new models come factory-equipped with one. For older models, a range of after-market products is available (see *Immobilise Now!*, above right).

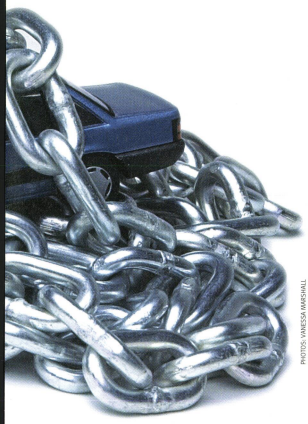
- **Kill switch**: Such a device cuts the power to your car's engine. It can be installed by a car electrician and should cost from around $100. You have to manually turn it on and off. While this offers some protection, all a thief with some time on their hands has to do is find the switch.
- **Steering wheel lock**: These devices may deter some thieves, but only a few models offer much resistance to somebody who knows how to beat them. In our last test (CHOICE, May 1999), all that was required to break some models was a few hammer blows. One could even be snapped with bare hands.

Other theft-prevention tips include:

- Always lock the car's doors, close the windows and make sure all security devices are in place or switched on.
- Don't leave your car running unattended or with the keys in the ignition for any period of time.
- Park in a well-lit area and — where possible — a security car park.
- Don't hide a spare set of keys in the car.
- Don't leave any valuables visible in the car, as they may attract thieves.

CAR THEFT STATS

- In 1999–2000, more than 145,000 cars were stolen in Australia — that's about one every four minutes.
- About 25,000 of the stolen cars were never found.
- About 25% are stolen by professionals for parts, or to 'rebirth' and sell them on the used car market.
- About 75% are stolen for joyrides or as a getaway car for another crime.
- On average, about 12 out of every 1000 registered cars are stolen. That's one of the highest rates in the western world.
- The ACT and NSW have the highest theft rates (more than 15 out of 1000), Queensland and the NT the lowest (less than 10 out of 1000).
- Car thefts cost hundreds of millions of dollars a year in insurance and criminal justice costs.
- Stolen cars are mainly 10 years old or older.
- Friday and Saturday nights from 6 pm to midnight are the most likely times for a car to be stolen.
- Nationally, about 36% of all cars have an immobiliser, but only 3% of all stolen cars have one. In most of those cases, the thief had access to the car keys.



PHOTOS: VANESSA MARSHALL

Immobilise Now!

CAR·SAFE
Driving down vehicle theft

Under its trademark CAR·SAFE, the National Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Council, which is jointly funded by all state and territory governments and the insurance industry, has been working to reduce both professional and opportunistic car theft.

Its *Immobilise Now!* program aims to reduce the opportunistic theft of older cars by offering discounted, standards-approved immobilisers. You can choose among a wide range of models, costing between $160 and $200 fully installed, depending on the type.

However, the condition and wiring of some older cars may lead to higher costs that'll be explained to you by the participating registered installer (call CAR·SAFE on 1300 132 146 or check www.carsafe.com.au/t_frame_09.html for the one closest to you).

Compliance with Standard AS/NZS4601:1999 *Vehicle Immobilisers* guarantees the immobiliser:

- Meets certain security requirements.
- Doesn't affect the safe operation of your car.
- Is automatically activated when you turn off the ignition.

HOW AN IMMOBILISER WORKS

An immobiliser is the best form of security for your car. It's an electronic device that interrupts the power supply to two or more systems required to start the engine — for example, the fuel pump, starter motor or ignition. Unless the system receives a certain signal, the car won't start. The system is constantly changing the signal, so it becomes virtually impossible to 'crack'.

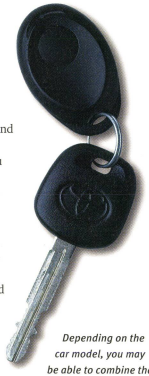
Depending on the model, there are several ways to provide the required signal:

- You insert an electronically coded key or plug into a socket that's mounted on your car's dashboard.
- You attach an electronically coded transponder to your keyring. It's about the size of the cap of a ballpoint pen, and communicates with the immobiliser when you insert the ignition key.
- You give the signal via a remote transmitter on your keyring. If your car has remote central locking, it can be combined with the immobiliser function.

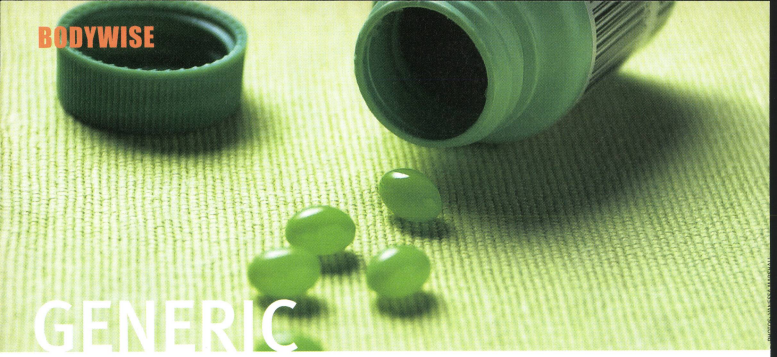
DON'T BUY A STOLEN CAR

If you unknowingly buy a stolen car that's then tracked down, you may lose the car and your money. Be particularly careful when a car has just been re-registered. There are precautions you can take against buying a stolen car:

- Buy from a licensed car dealer. It's their responsibility to ensure there's no money owing on the car, and that it's not stolen. You're protected if the car was stolen and is tracked down after you bought it.
- If a deal sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Be very careful if you're offered a car at a price that's well below its usual market value. (You can find out about a car's market value using the used car database on our website: go to www.choice.com.au and type 'used car database' into the search box.)
- If you have the car inspected by your motoring organisation, ask them to check for signs of it being stolen.
- Call your state registration authority and check whether there's any money owing on the car. Some also have a registry for written-off or stolen vehicles.
- Check the car's identification plate (usually found in the engine bay on the firewall to the passenger compartment) for signs of tampering. Check that the Vehicle Identification Number (VIN), engine and registration numbers on the car match those on the registration form.
- Make sure the seller is also the owner. If in doubt, ask to see a photo ID, proof of purchase and servicing receipts. ■



Depending on the car model, you may be able to combine the immobiliser function with your remote central locking system.



GENERIC DRUGS

They're cheaper and often just as good as the original brand — so ask your doctor to prescribe them.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **They may not** *be appropriate for everyone, but for many people a 'generic' version of a brand-name drug works just as well — and saves you money.*
- **What's more,** *brand premiums on the more expensive drugs don't count towards the government's pharmaceutical safety net scheme, so you also pay more before becoming eligible for it.*

It doesn't take long to rack up a drug bill. Last financial year Australia spent over $4.25 billion on prescription drugs alone. If you used any of them, you directly paid around 20% of the cost. One way to save on your prescription bill is to use 'generic' drugs whenever possible.

What are 'generic' drugs?

There are over 2400 different brands of 594 essential drugs covered by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS). These are subsidised by the government (and taxpayer): you don't pay the full cost at the pharmacy.

In Australia, drugs are protected by a 20-year patent. During this time the company recoups its research and development costs (30% of the total drug cost) and establishes brand loyalty through marketing (25% of the total cost) and lack of competition. No other company can produce the same drug while the patent exists, unless it has a licensing agreement with the original company (see *Tricks of the trade*, page 32), although other companies can, and often do, produce similar drugs with similar medical effects.

When the patent expires, other drug companies produce so-called 'generic' brands of the original drug with the same active ingredient. For example, Alphamox, Amohexal, Bgramin and Moxacin are generic brands of amoxycillin, a broad-spectrum antibiotic. The original brand of amoxycillin, Amoxil, is more expensive. Often the price of the original brand doesn't drop because the drug company wants to maintain a perception of quality, but all prescription drugs must meet the same quality specifications. Most brands of generic drugs are neither less effective nor more toxic than the original brands.

Drug manufacturers have to supply evidence to the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) that the generic brand is bio-equivalent to the original brand and can be substituted. This means in most cases that at the same strength and formulation, the generic brand has the same medical effect on your body as the original brand. What's different are the brand name, packaging, shape, colour, size and excipients — substances used to colour, bind, lubricate and add bulk to medications. If generic brands of drugs can't prove they're bio-equivalent, such as different brands of the blood-clotting drug warfarin, they can't be substituted.

Brands that can be substituted are clearly marked in the schedule of pharmaceutical benefits (a list of all the drugs approved under the PBS) that doctors and pharmacists use when they prescribe or dispense drugs.

Buying cheaper brands

Normally when you pick up your prescription you'll pay no more than $21.90 (or $3.50 if you're eligible for a concession). Once you or your family have reached $669.70 in a year (or $182 if you have a concession card) you'll get your prescription drugs for $3.50 (or free if you have a concession card) if you've registered for the government's safety net scheme.

But if you buy a brand of a drug that could have been substituted with a cheaper generic brand you'll pay extra. Expensive drugs carry an average **brand premium** of $2.53 (although the range is between one cent and $79.48). The extra cost of brand premiums doesn't count towards your safety net total.

Over a year this can add up. Over 30 million prescriptions were dispensed for brand-name drugs for which a generic brand could have been substituted in the year up to August 2000.

We looked at the price differences between brands of some drugs used to treat common medical conditions. The costs can add up if the drug is used regularly (see the table, below). If you frequently use medication or use multiple drugs to treat a condition, it's even more important to use generic brands when they're available, or you'll be spending more on drugs before becoming eligible for discounts.

When your doctor prescribes a drug, ask them to prescribe the cheapest that's suitable for your condition or ask your pharmacist to substitute a cheaper brand if possible.

If the drug is identified in the PBS as being interchangeable, your pharmacist can substitute a cheaper drug as long as:

- Your doctor hasn't marked 'not for substitution' on your prescription.
- The drug doesn't carry a therapeutic premium (see page 32).
- You agree the drug can be substituted — your pharmacist shouldn't substitute your usual brand without asking you first. Pharmacists may get special supply deals on certain brands, but if you're happy

At the pharmacy

Mark (not his real name) has been on Renitec, a brand of enalapril maleate (an ACE inhibitor to treat high blood pressure), for seven years. For the last five he's been taking 5 mg every day. He didn't realise Renitec is a more expensive brand of the drug even though it cost him $22.95 — more than the PBS maximum of $21.90 for drugs without a brand premium. Neither his pharmacist nor his doctor told him there were cheaper brands.

When Mark went back to his pharmacist recently he asked if he could substitute a cheaper version for the brand-name drug. After checking the schedule of pharmaceutical benefits, the pharmacist dispensed a generic brand of the same drug for $18.55. By changing to a generic drug Mark has cut his drug bill by at least $52.80 a year.

On top of the actual drug cost you pay additional pharmacy costs, such as safety net recording, a dispensing fee and product mark-ups. Like brand and therapeutic premiums (see *Buying cheaper brands*, left), none of these additional costs goes towards your safety net total.

For example, Mark can only claim $15.82 towards his safety net total whenever he buys Renitec (5 mg) or an alternative brand. When he bought Renitec at this pharmacy he paid $7.13 on top of that (which includes the brand premium and pharmacy costs). When he bought the generic brand he paid $15.82 plus an additional $2.73 in pharmacy costs.

The amount a pharmacy charges can vary widely, especially for drugs that cost less than the maximum PBS amount of $21.90. So to get the most out of asking your pharmacist to substitute cheaper generic brands, it pays to shop around.

COMPARISONS OF SOME COMMON DRUG BRANDS

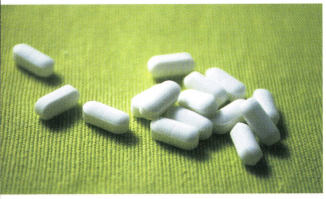
Active ingredient	Use	Premium brand/s (strength / form / quantity)	Cheaper brands	Price difference ($)
Amoxycillin	Antibiotic	Amoxil (250 mg / capsule / 20)	Alphamox 250, Amohexal, Amoxycillin-BC, Bgramin, Chem mart amoxycillin, Cilamox, DBL amoxycillin, GenRx amoxycillin, Healthsense amoxycillin, Moxacin, Terry White Chemists amoxycillin.	0.72
Nitrazepam	Sedative (benzodiazepine)	Mogadon (5 mg / tablet / 25)	Alodorm	2.02
Naproxen	Anti-inflammatory (NSAID)	Naprosyn (250 mg / tablet / 100)	Inza 250	3.12
Fluoxetine hydrochloride	Depression (SSRI)	Prozac (20 mg / capsule / 28)	Auscap, Chem mart fluoxetine, Fluohexal, Fluoxetine-BC,GenRx fluoxetine, Healthsense fluoxetine, Lovan, Terry White Chemists fluoxetine, Zactin	2.59
Enalapril maleate	High blood pressure (ACE inhibitor)	Renitec M (5 mg / tablet / 30)	Alphapril, Auspril, Chem mart enalapril, Enahexal, Enalapril-BC, GenRx enalapril, Healthsense enalapril, Terry White Chemists enalapril	3.03
Levonorgestrel with ethinyloestradiol	Contraceptive	Triphasil 28 (tablets / 28)	Trifeme 28	7.88
Salbutamol sulphate	Asthma	Ventolin CFC-free inhaler, Airomir	Asmol CFC-free, Epaq	0.62

with one brand of generic drug they shouldn't swap it for another without your consent.

You also have to pay more for some drugs from certain groups used to treat peptic ulcers or hypertension (high blood pressure). The government only pays up to the cheapest brand in a class of drug, so if you're prescribed a more expensive drug in the same class you pay a **therapeutic premium**, unless your doctor believes you will have side effects or problems using any of the other drugs.

For example, Tritace is the only brand of ramipril, a type of drug for hypertension called an ACE inhibitor, at 10 mg strength in a capsule form. It has a therapeutic premium and is more expensive than other ACE inhibitors such as different brands of enalapril maleate, fosinopril sodium and lisonopril, which are considered to have a similar medical effect despite their different chemical structures.

Your pharmacist can't substitute another drug if you've been prescribed one with a therapeutic premium, so make sure you ask your doctor whether you have the safest and cheapest medication for your condition before taking the prescription.



Generics vs new drugs

The National Prescribing Service (NPS), an independent organisation that promotes better use of medicines, advises doctors that "prescribing new or expensive drugs promoted by the pharmaceutical industry may not always offer any advantages over cheaper drugs that have been on the market for some time".

One of the major advantages of a drug with generic brands is that the active ingredient's been on the market for years — long enough for people to have a better idea of what the side effects are. Even if a drug's been clinically trialled, it's not until consumers use it on a large scale that the true extent of its effect — and side effects — are known. So ask your doctor if there's a drug with generic brands that's suitable for your condition.

That's not to say older drugs with generic brands are better for everyone — all drugs have side effects and your doctor has to decide which drug will have the best results and the fewest side effects. Unfortunately, there's concern that some doctors rely too heavily on pharmaceutical marketing material rather than independent sources of information like the NPS on which to base their prescribing decisions.

New drugs with new active ingredients have to have drug trials behind them before they're allowed on the market. They don't have to prove they're superior, only that they're equivalent to existing drugs on the market. And sometimes the drug company doesn't publish the full story.

In September 2000 the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published a company-sponsored study that said Celebrex, a new anti-inflammatory drug used to treat arthritis, caused fewer gastro-intestinal problems than more traditional anti-inflammatories, such as ibuprofen. However, only six months of trial data were published.

A subsequent review of 12 months' clinical data by the US Food and Drug Administration indicated that the drug's highly promoted safety advantage over older anti-inflammatories was much lower when used over 12 months at lower doses, as there was no significant reduction in the incidence of gastro-intestinal side effects when compared to two other anti-inflammatories.

Last year, Celebrex cost Australian taxpayers $140 million through the PBS.

Tricks of the trade

Any company that patents a drug has a strong commercial interest in delaying their competitors' ability to produce a generic equivalent. So how do they do it?

Drugs come in different forms, such as tablets, capsules and liquids. But a tablet may deliver its active ingredient in a different way from a capsule or a liquid, so the different forms aren't considered identical. Generic drugs must be in the same form as the original to be considered equivalent and interchangeable.

Before the original patent expires, drug companies often take out a whole range of drug patents for different formulations (such as a capsule instead of a tablet) using the original active ingredient. So by the time the generic comes on the market the form can be superseded — and a generic equivalent of the new form can't be manufactured until its patent expires.

For example, in 1998/9 Losec, which is Astra Pharmaceutical's patented capsule form of omeprazole (used to treat peptic ulcers), was the biggest-selling prescription drug on the Australian market. At the time another company, Alphapharm, had an equivalent omeprazole capsule ready to go on the market when the original patent expired. Astra tried to prevent the generic capsule going on sale by taking Alphapharm to court, claiming the generic brand breached Astra's patent. Astra lost the case. Then it changed the form of Losec from a capsule to a tablet and took its capsule form off the Australian market.

Australian doctors generally prescribe by brand name (unlike in the UK, where they usually prescribe by active ingredient), so if they wrote 'Losec', consumers couldn't ask for it to be substituted, as Alphapharm's capsule wasn't equivalent to Astra's tablet. The Alphapharm capsule failed in the market, even though it contained the same active ingredient. Alphapharm now produces a tablet under a licensing arrangement with Astra.

new

THE HARD WORD

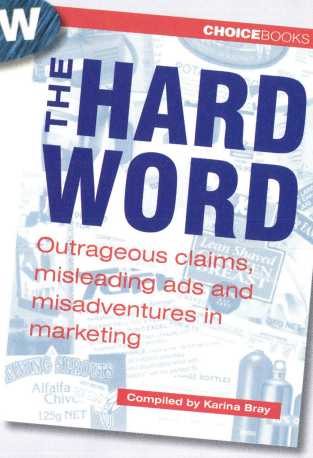
Outrageous claims, misleading ads and misadventures in marketing

Compiled by CHOICE journalist Karina Bray

The Hard Word back page of CHOICE gives readers a chance to look at the lighter side of consumerism, while still taking perpetrators to task about unethical marketing.

Every month for the past three years we've published examples of the advertising and marketing world's outrageous claims, misleading advertising and misadventures in printed copy that have left consumers confused, clueless, ripped off or laughing their heads off. We've had thousands sent in by readers and here's a collection of the best, with plenty of great new entries you haven't seen before.

$18.00 CODE: HDWD



THE CHOICE GUIDE TO BABY PRODUCTS

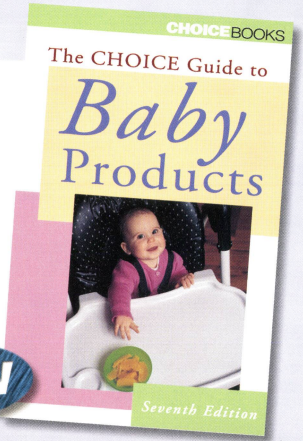
SEVENTH EDITION

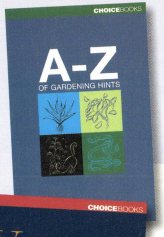
Undoubtedly *the* buying guide for parents, this has been a reliable source of information for families and friends of newborns for over 10 years. Now into its seventh edition, it's been fully revised and updated to include information on tests of highchairs and baby monitors.

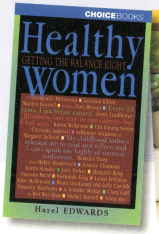
It starts with a checklist of what you'll need when the baby arrives, then gives reports of tests and surveys for CHOICE on baby carriers, strollers (including general information on various types), cots, portable cots and clothes dryers. There are sections on child car restraints, safety in and around the home and playground, toys, and other products such as playpens, folding chairs, walkers, jumpers, bouncers and trampolines, including important safety hints and 'what to look for' checklists. Importantly, there's also advice about some of the other issues new parents may face: postnatal depression, childcare, SIDS, and the latest on childhood immunisation.

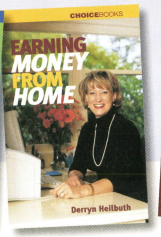
$20.00 CODE: CBP7

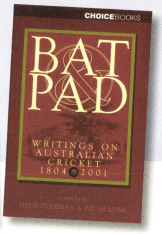
new











A-Z OF GARDENING HINTS

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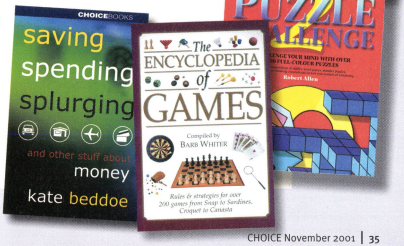
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BIG Fridges

You'll fit everything but the kitchen sink into these models...

IN A NUTSHELL

- **On test: Eight large fridges** *ranging in capacity from around 530–560 litres: suitable for a large family. A fridge this size gives good storage versatility, making them all quite easy to live with.*
- **The main differences** *are in temperature performance (which could affect the life of your food) and energy efficiency (which has a major effect on your running costs).*
- **The SAMSUNG COOL TECH Plus** *has a separate evaporator for each compartment, which significantly increases the humidity of the fresh-food area so it's closer to that of a crisper — your unwrapped fruit and vegetables won't dry out so fast. We liked this best of the (few) new fridge features.*

WHAT TO BUY

SAMSUNG COOL TECH Plus SR-L628EV	$2199
WHIRLPOOL 6ET19PKXHW	$1850
LG GR-T632DVQ	$1499

These were solid performers in most categories. The **WHIRLPOOL**'s the cheapest to run, and the other two aren't far behind. See page 38 for their profiles.

Of the rest, the **MAYTAG** and **AMANA** fell down on temperature performance, while the **GE, MITSUBISHI** and **WESTINGHOUSE** had comparatively poor energy efficiency. See the table (page 40) for detailed scores, and *What about the rest?*, page 39, for more on these models.

Is your fridge bursting at the seams, bottles and food all crammed in together? You need the right-size fridge for your storage requirements, as fridges that are always crammed full can be unable to work properly. It's important that, however full it is, your fridge maintains a consistently cold temperature to store food safely.

We put to the test eight large fridges ranging in capacity from around 530–560 L — they're suitable for, say, a large family or share house.

INNOVATIONS

A common complaint about frost-free fridges is that they dry food out. The **SAMSUNG COOL TECH Plus** has two evaporators (one for each compartment) instead of the traditional single one, which allows higher humidity in the fresh-food compartment that suits fresh-food storage better. It also means the freezer and fresh-food compartments share no airflow, which should prevent odours from drifting between the two.

PHOTOS: GEOFF AMBLER

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- **Size:** Allow at least a couple of centimetres at the sides, back and top of the fridge for air circulation; check the manufacturer's recommendations.
- **Reversible door:** Make sure the door opens in the right direction for your kitchen or is reversible (see note 11, page 41, for more on this).
- **Frost-free or cyclic defrost:** All the fridges in this test are frost-free, which means you don't have to defrost them. Some cyclic-defrost models may be cheaper or quieter.
- **Freezer location:** See *Where should the freezer go?*, below.
- **Energy efficiency:** Consider long-term running costs as part of the purchase price. While the number of stars on the energy label helps compare models of the same size, pay particular attention to the kWh per year figure, which gives a more accurate indication of energy use. (Also see note 8, page 41.)
- **Shelves:** Make sure you can arrange the shelves easily and without wasting space to fit your groceries, including tall items and bottles. If the fridge will be in a corner, make sure you can remove its shelves with the door open at only a 90° angle. Some plastic shelves may not be as durable as those made of other materials.
- **Moving and cleaning:** Look for rollers for easy moving, and brakes to keep the fridge in place. Check for smooth, easy-to-clean surfaces and avoid models with dirt traps. It'll be easier to find food and clean the fridge if there's a bright light.

Features and accessories

- Look for a **chiller** if you need to store fresh meat and fish. Its temperature should be close to freezing and ideally it would have a separate temperature control.
- A **chill zone** close to the cold-air outlets is handy for cooling drinks quickly, but food left there too long could freeze.
- A **dairy compartment** keeps butter or hard cheese slightly soft for easier use.
- **Crisper** drawers should be well sealed to keep vegetables fresh; check that the air outlets don't blow into them, as this will dry food out faster.
- Look for **ice trays** and other special containers you'd find useful. The **SAMSUNG** has a through-the-door water dispenser.
- The **LG** has a door-cooling system, which keeps the main bottle shelf cool.

GETTING THE TEMPERATURE RIGHT

Keeping food cold slows down the rate at which most bacteria and mould grow, and helps to keep the food fresh for longer. The safest way to store fresh food is at temperatures between 0°C and 4°C — check the temperature with a fridge thermometer. (See *Baffled by temperatures?* on page 38 for the results of our test of some thermometers, and for tips to help get temperatures right.)

Fridges shouldn't be too cold either, because at less than 0°C some foods, such as some fruit and vegetables, will freeze and could become inedible.

In this test, the **SAMSUNG** is the only model with electronic controls that allow you relatively independent temperature control in the two compartments. Although one of the **LG**'s controls is electronic, each control still affects the temperature of both compartments.

WHERE SHOULD THE FREEZER GO?

A bottom-mounted freezer can be less energy-efficient, though that's not true of all models, as the **SAMSUNG** and **AMANA** in this test show. An efficient fridge saves you money and, since fridges are on for 24 hours, 365 days a year, also saves the environment hundreds of kilograms of greenhouse gases.

With a bottom-mounted freezer the crisper (which sits just above the freezer) is more likely to freeze some foods. So you may find you need to keep these kinds of food — lettuce, for example — towards the front of the crisper, or elsewhere in the fridge.

However, a lot of people find a top-mounted fresh-food compartment to be at a better height for everyday ease of use. A bottom-mounted freezer also generally has handy slide-out baskets, and can also be good for wheelchair users or those with a bad back if they don't use the freezer often. See *For people with a disability* on page 40 for more on this.

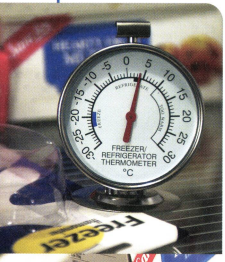
BAFFLED BY TEMPERATURES?

Measuring the temperature of your fridge allows you to accurately set the controls so as to get the best quality and longest storage times for food; it may even save on running costs.

We tested 10 thermometers of various types (a small sample of the kinds available, and all the designated fridge thermometers we could find) to see how well they worked in a fridge. Those designed for this were mainly metal ones with a round dial and a needle; others were either digital or conventional glass ones. Fridge thermometers aren't easy to find, but a good place to look is kitchen and homewares shops, and sometimes hardware or electrical stores.

- The two thermometers we found with a probe and a digital readout were accurate. They're available from Dick Smith Electronics: the **DIGITAL STEM Y5031** (around $22) and **DIGITAL POCKET Q1452** (around $30) — see the photo below. Make sure this kind has a large, easy to read Celsius scale. They're not much good for the freezer, though, as the batteries aren't likely to work for long at these temperatures.
- We found four with dials, but they varied in accuracy and/or readability — only one was accurate and easy to read (but unfortunately unbranded; see the photo below).
- Three traditional liquid-in-glass thermometers also tended to be less accurate and/or difficult to read. And it's not a good idea to leave a mercury one in the fridge in case it gets broken.

Fridge temperatures vary as the motor runs and stops, when the door's opened, and especially if warm food is added. Therefore it's best to check temperatures quite a few times to build up an idea of the average inside the fridge and freezer. Another way to do this is to put your thermometer (if it's submersible) in a tumbler of water and leave it in the fridge.



If you want to check how even the temperatures are throughout a compartment, leave a thermometer in for a few days and check the temperature regularly, then do the same thing in a number of places. Door temperatures tend to be warmest, so it's worth checking this area, especially if you store milk in a door shelf. (If you use a thermometer in a glass of water, leave it for a day in each position to stabilise before reading it.)

You can check a submersible thermometer's accuracy by immersing it in wet crushed ice — it should read very close to 0°C.

This dial thermometer (above left) was both accurate and easy to read — but has no brand name. You should be able to find it in this packaging in most restaurant and catering supply stores (for around $8). All the other dial models were inaccurate and/or hard to read.

The two digital probe thermometers we found were accurate and easy to read, but having them in your fridge in a glass of water all the time may not be convenient.

PROFILES

Models in the *What to buy* list are pr

SAMSUNG SR-L628EV

Freezer on bottom.
Price: $2199.

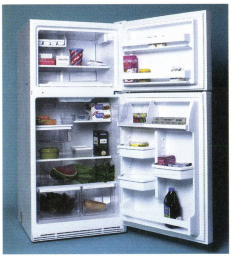
GOOD POINTS

- Good energy efficiency.
- Good at cooling down a large warm load quickly in the fresh-food compartment.
- The 'mid' setting provides a reasonable temperature combination between fridge and freezer.
- Good at coping with changes in outside temperature without the controls being adjusted: handy for areas where the climate varies a lot.
- The crisper is good at stopping vegetables drying out.
- The fresh-food compartment has the highest humidity of all tested models.
- Easy to use.
- The electronic controls are relatively independent, so you can set one compartment without affecting the temperature of the other.
- Has a chiller.
- Has a through-the-door water dispenser from a container inside the door, so it doesn't need plumbing in (but water tended to drip after use) — see the photo, far right.
- Alarm sounds when the door is left open.

BAD POINTS

- Controls in the fresh-food compartment have quite large steps, so you can't fine-tune the temperature easily.
- The main bottle shelf in the door is warmer than the average fridge temperature.
- Relatively large temperature fluctuations means food might lose its quality faster (see note 4, page 41).
- Fairly noisy compared to other fridges.
- No dairy compartment.

k order. Prices shown are recommended retail, as provided by manufacturers in September 2001.



WHIRLPOOL 6ET19PKXHW

Freezer on top.
Price: $1850.

GOOD POINTS

- Very good energy efficiency.
- The 'mid' setting provides a reasonable temperature combination between fridge and freezer.
- Good temperature uniformity (see note 4).
- The temperature doesn't fluctuate much, so food quality should be maintained relatively well (see note 4).
- The crisper is very good at keeping vegetables from drying out.
- Versatile and easy to use, but it has a deeper cabinet than most other tested models, so it's a little hard to reach the back.

BAD POINTS

- The range of temperature settings is a bit limited.
- Fresh food may tend to freeze with outside temperature changes in winter, unless you reset the controls.
- No chiller.
- Noisy compared to other fridges.

LG GR-T632DVQ

Freezer on top.
Price: $1499.

GOOD POINTS

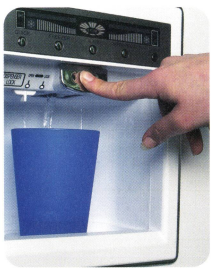
- Good energy efficiency.
- The 'mid' setting provides good temperature combinations between fridge and freezer.
- Good temperature uniformity (see note 4).
- The temperature doesn't fluctuate much, so food quality should be maintained relatively well (see note 4).
- The controls allow a good range of temperature combinations.
- Has a chiller.
- The quietest fridge in the test, and also fairly quiet compared to other fridges we've tested.
- Alarm sounds when the door is left open.
- Has a door cooling system that keeps the main bottle shelf cool.

BAD POINTS

- Pushbutton controls in the fresh-food compartment have quite large steps, so you can't fine-tune the temperature easily.
- The fresh-food compartment may tend to freeze and the freezer warm up with outside climate change in winter, unless you reset the controls.
- No dairy compartment.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

- The **MAYTAG** has good energy efficiency, a reasonable 'mid' setting and its crisper is good at keeping vegetables from drying out. In general, though, its temperature performance is mediocre, rating only 50% (see note 4, page 41, for what temperature performance includes).
- The **AMANA** has good energy efficiency and its crisper is good at keeping vegetables from drying out. However, its temperature performance also isn't good (49%), it's very noisy compared to other fridges — the loudest in the test — and has no chiller.
- The **GE** is the fastest in the test for cooling down a warm load and good at coping with changes in outside temperature. But it has the highest energy consumption, leading to high running costs, no chiller, and is noisy compared to other fridges.
- The **MITSUBISHI** has a reasonable 'mid' setting and good temperature range but its temperature performance is let down by considerable fluctuations in both compartments and some variation in the fresh-food compartment's uniformity. Though large, its crisper rated the lowest for keeping food from drying out, it has no dairy compartment and it's fairly noisy compared to other fridges.
- The **WESTINGHOUSE**'s crisper keeps vegetables fresh well, but its temperature performance isn't particularly good (56%), and it's noisy compared to other fridges.



The Samsung's through-the-door water dispenser saves the door being opened constantly for a cold drink.

Brand / model (in rank order)	PERFORMANCE 1 Overall score (%)	2 Ease of use score (%)	3 Energy efficiency score (%)	4 Temperature performance score (%)	5 Crisper freshness score (%)	6 Cooling score (%)	6 Cooling time (hr:min)	7 Claimed / measured energy use (kWh / year)	8 10 runni costs
SAMSUNG Cool Tech Plus SR-L628EV	73	77	72	63	80	76	3:54	784 / 770	963
WHIRLPOOL 6ET19PKXHW **(A)**	73	72	77	72	90	62	4:52	790 / 677	846
LG GR-T632DVQ	70	69	70	76	64	67	4:33	731 / 759	949
MAYTAG Plus GT1928PAGW	69	77	72	50	89	70	4:22	727 / 722	903
AMANA BX518V	67	75	73	49	88	61	5:01	670 / 714	893
GE TBG18JA WW	62	66	37	65	71	77	3:50	1135 / 1129	1411
MITSUBISHI MR-560E-W-A **(B)**	60	68	53	62	52	65	4:40	895 / 957	1196
WESTINGHOUSE Freestyle RJ5325 **(C)**	60	72	47	56	85	52	5:32	890 / 995	1244

FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

An occupational therapist from the Independent Living Centre checked the fridges to see how easy they are for someone with a disability to use.

FOR PEOPLE WITH POOR VISION

- The fridge with the best lighting and the most clearly marked controls is the **MAYTAG**.
- Some electronic fridges, including the **LG** and **SAMSUNG** in this test, sound a warning alarm if they're left open.

FOR PEOPLE IN A WHEELCHAIR

- A bottom-mounted freezer tends to make using both compartments easier. The **SAMSUNG** has the most accessible space, although the chiller and fresh-food compartment's top shelf aren't very easy to get to.

FOR PEOPLE WITH UPPER LIMB DYSFUNCTION

- The **WHIRLPOOL** is the best, with an open-style handle and components that are easy to reach and remove.
- Electronic controls or ones with large knobs or slide bars are easiest to manipulate.
- Two small crisper drawers are easier to use than a single large one (see the table for model details), and pull-out compartments should be stable.

FOR PEOPLE WITH A BAD BACK

- The **SAMSUNG** has the best access to most areas in both the fresh-food and freezer compartment.
- If you use the freezer a lot it's better on top; if you don't, go for a bottom-mounted one.
- Temperature controls should be easy to reach without bending.

How reliable have our subscribers found them?

We asked a group of subscribers whether their fridge had needed repair in the previous 12 months. There wasn't much difference in reliability between brands, and fridges are generally a reliable appliance — only 10% overall had needed repair.

The graph shows the results for brands for which we received sufficient replies (the number in brackets tells you how many readers reported on the brand). The results include all types of fridges, not just those in this test.

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR

Differences of more than 7% are meaningful.

Average for all fridges	90
Sharp (677)	95
Samsung (174)	92
Whirlpool (669)	92
Fisher & Paykel (5136)	90
Kelvinator (2738)	90
Westinghouse (5880)	90
GE (666)	87
Amana / Kleenmaid (323)	85

PERCENTAGE WHO WOULD BUY THE SAME BRAND AGAIN

Fisher & Paykel (5190)	93
Westinghouse (5907)	90
Whirlpool (670)	90
GE (672)	88
Amana / Kleenmaid (323)	87
Kelvinator (2741)	86
Sharp (674)	86
Samsung (171)	80

10 FEATURES			SPECIFICATIONS									
Chiller	Crisper	Dairy compartment	Shelves removable when door open to 90°	11 Door hinge position	Freezer location	Measured dimensions (H x W x D, cm)*	12 Claimed total gross volume (L)	12 Claimed gross volume, fresh food (L)	12 Claimed gross volume, freezer (L)	Warranty (years)**	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Price ($)***
✓	1		✓ (F)	R	Bottom	181 x 82 x 73	560	372	187	2	Korea	Samsung	2199
	2 (E)	✓	✓ (G)	R or L (H)	Top	168 x 77 x 79	564	403	161	2	USA	Whirlpool	1850
✓	2		✓ (G)	R	Top	180 x 86 x 73	557	381	176	2	Korea	LG	1499
✓ (D)	2	✓	✓ (G)	R or L (H)	Top	171 x 76 x 75	550	378	167	5	USA	Maytag	2079
	2	✓	✓ (G)	R or L (H)	Bottom	171 x 76 x 81	532	352	180	5	USA	Kleenmaid	2599
	2	✓	✓	R or L (H)	Top	166 x 76 x 78	537	367	170	2	USA	Shriro	1893
✓	1		✓	R or L	Top	179 x 76 x 74	560	382	178	5	Thailand	Mitsubishi	1641
✓ (D)	2 (E)	✓	✓	R or L	Top	171 x 80 x 73	532	384	148	1 (J)	Australia	Electrolux	1499

1 Overall score

The overall score is based on performance and ease of use, weighted as follows:
Ease of use: 20%.
Energy efficiency: 24%.
Temperature performance: 24%.
Crisper freshness: 12%.
Cooling time: 20%.

2 Ease of use score

The ease of use score is made up of:

- Versatility of food storage: 60%.
- Ease of cleaning: 30%.
- Ease of understanding and setting temperature controls: 10%.

3 Energy efficiency score

This test assesses the comparative energy consumption, and gives an indication of the amount of electricity used over one year of normal operation. The worst model, the **GE**, uses around 67% more energy to run than the best, the **WHIRLPOOL** — see notes 7 and 8 for differences you can expect in costs, both to yourself and the environment.

4 Temperature performance score

A good temperature for a fridge is 3°C, for a freezer –18°C. The temperature performance score is a measure of the fridge's ability to manage basic cooling temperatures in all compartments, and is based on the following factors:

- Is the temperature for both the fridge and freezer appropriate when the controls are set to 'mid' or, as in the **WESTINGHOUSE**, to the recommended setting? (15%)
- Is there an adequate range of temperatures to satisfy the needs of most users? (25%)
- Can the fridge and freezer cope with changes in outside temperature? (25%)
- Are compartment temperatures generally uniform, without warmer or colder areas? (15%)
- Do temperatures fluctuate too much due to the compressor running and resting? (20%)

5 Crisper freshness score

This test measures the amount of humidity in the crisper compartment, giving an indication of how well it will keep unwrapped vegetables without drying them out.

6 Cooling score/cooling time

This test shows the fridge's ability to handle a difficult cooling job in the fresh-food compartment. We measured the time it takes to cool down a 20 kg load in the fresh-food compartment by 15°C on a hot day.

While the **LG** has 'super cooling' and the **SAMSUNG** 'super quick cooling' (features designed to cool the fresh-food compartment rapidly), a good fridge should be able to cool a warm load quickly anyway, so we tested these models with the normal method; they were fine.

7 Claimed versus measured energy use

The energy tests indicate how much energy a fridge might use in a year to maintain an acceptable temperature in both the fresh-food and freezer compartments. A few of the models used more energy than their labels claimed, and some less; the **WHIRLPOOL** used significantly less than claimed, the **WESTINGHOUSE** significantly more.

8 Running costs over 10 years

The running cost is calculated from the energy used over 10 years, at a rate of 12.5 cents per kilowatt hour. A 10-year period gives a useful indication of the long-term difference between high and low energy usage — and your fridge should last at least that long.

The difference between the best and worst models in our test would result in about $500 over 10 years, and in around 4500 kg of greenhouse gas production — a lot when you consider the millions of fridges in Australia doing the same thing.

9 Noise level

We measured the noise level of each fridge during normal running; more noise is produced when the compressor starts up and also during the defrost cycle. The design of your kitchen and fridge's location also make a difference to what you'll hear. These large models are mostly quite noisy and may seem even louder in the night.

10 Features

See *What to look for*, page 37, for more on these.

11 Door hinge position

R = on the right; L = on the left.
A door that's reversible after purchase (see footnote H) is good if you move house and/or need to position the fridge differently. While you can do this yourself with some models, manufacturers recommend getting a service call.

12 Claimed gross volume

The volume quoted by the manufacturer tells you approximately how much air space the fridge has to cool; less space is available for storage. Use the volumes to get an idea of how big the freezer is compared with the fresh-food compartment, so you can choose a fridge that meets your storage needs.

* *Measurements are rounded up to the next centimetre.*

** *Warranty conditions vary, but all cover compressor-system parts for five years.*

*** *Prices are recommended retail, as provided by manufacturers in September 2001.*

(A) *This model has been discontinued, but you may still find it in shops. It's replaced by model 6ERPGTKXX (its door is available only with hinges on the right and isn't reversible, and there have also been cosmetic changes).*

(B) *This model has been discontinued but you may still find it in shops. It's replaced by model MR-560i, with changes to the compressor that may affect performance.*

(C) *This model has been discontinued but you may still find it in shops. It's replaced by model RI532T, which has some cosmetic changes.*

(D) *With a separate control.*

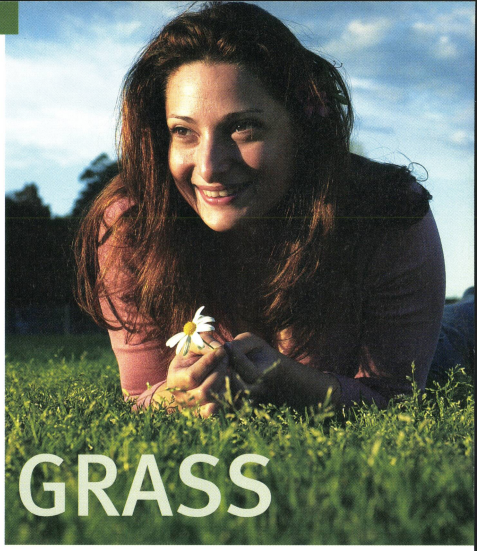
(E) *One larger than the other.*

(F) *In the fresh-food compartment, one shelf (only if used in a particular position) and the crisper can't be removed; all shelves in the freezer can.*

(G) *But the hinge-side crisper needs the crisper shelf removed too.*

(H) *These are reversible after purchase, but you're recommended to get a service person to do it.*

(J) *Two years if you register.*



The best models in this test make lawnmowing a pretty easy job.

Green, green GRASS

IN A NUTSHELL

Five models *cut the grass almost perfectly; the rest aren't quite as good, but they still do a better than acceptable job.*

On test is a range of two- and four-stroke, petrol-powered mowers, chosen as being among the cheapest available (up to $750) in each brand. We picked two from each brand when there were both two-stroke and four-stroke models. Some brands' prices start considerably lower than others, so it's useful to compare the capabilities of models ranging from around $400 to $750 recommended retail price.

All the models can cut grass typical of what you'd find in the average backyard without much trouble, and even the worst of them cope with heavily overgrown grass if taken slowly. There isn't a great deal of difference between them for ease of use, and even the best models have some weaknesses in this area. All the mowers passed our safety tests.

The **HONDA Residential HRU 19R, ROVER 2-Stroke XL 03522** and **VIKING MB435** rated best overall. They had no problems with cutting short, medium or long grass, and scored well for ease of use. While the **HONDA** and **VIKING** are more expensive than all the other models, the differences between them and the others for both performance and ease of use are minor. Other brands have mowers around the same price as them that may perform as well.

The **MASPORT Impact** and **VICTA Vantage VAS201K** are also worth considering, scoring just as well in the performance tests and only slightly lower for ease of use.

The **ROVER 2-Stroke XL 03522** and the two-stroke **VICTA Vantage VAS201K** are considerably cheaper than the other top mowers, but two-strokes are more polluting than four-stroke mowers (see *What kind of mower?*, page 45).

WHAT TO BUY

HONDA Residential HRU 19R	$739
ROVER 2-Stroke XL 03522	$519
VIKING MB435	$690
MASPORT Impact	$649
VICTA Vantage VAS201K	$449

Prices are recommended retail ('average' retail for the Rover), as provided by manufacturers in September 2001.

Did you know?

- A two-stroke lawnmower emits the same amount of volatile organic compounds — precursors to smog — in one hour as 40 late-model cars.
- Using a four-stroke mower with unleaded petrol for one hour creates as much pollution as a new car driven 150 km.
- Two-stroke mowers emit 15 times more unburnt hydrocarbons per hour than four-stroke models.

Profiles

All the profiled models scored full marks for cutting short and medium grass, and all managed long grass well to very well. The main differences between these five mowers are in aspects of ease of use. Prices are recommended retail ('average' retail for the ROVER), as provided by the manufacturers in September 2001. Shop around: we bought most models for testing at a considerably lower price.

HONDA RESIDENTIAL HRU 19R

Price: $739

GOOD POINTS

- Has a very comfortable handle that gives you good control over the mower.
- Controls are easy to operate.
- Starter cord easy to pull; mower starts easily.
- Its noise is slightly less annoying than others.
- Has a wash nozzle.

BAD POINTS

- It's a heavy mower, and a little more tiring to push and manoeuvre than most others.

ROVER 2-STROKE XL 03522

Price: $519

GOOD POINTS

- Has a very comfortable handle that gives you good control over the mower.
- Mower starts easily.
- Adjustable handle height.
- Has a wash nozzle.

BAD POINTS

- Its noise is more annoying than other mowers'.

VIKING MB435

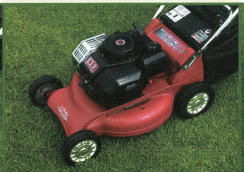
Price: $690

GOOD POINTS

- Very comfortable handle that gives you good control over the mower.
- The controls are easy to operate.
- Starter cord easy to pull; mower starts easily.
- Has a wash nozzle.

BAD POINTS

- A heavy mower, and a little more tiring to push and manoeuvre than most others.
- Fairly difficult to adjust the cutting height.



MASPORT IMPACT

Price: $649

GOOD POINTS

- Very comfortable handle that gives you good control over the mower.
- Very easy to pull the starter cord and the mower starts easily.

BAD POINTS

- Has a noticeable vibration that becomes irritating and uncomfortable over time.
- The controls are stiff and hard to operate.
- Fairly difficult to adjust the cutting height.

VICTA VANTAGE VAS201K

Price: $449

GOOD POINTS

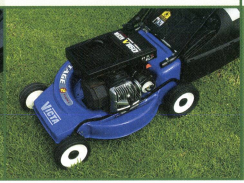
- None in particular apart from its good grass-cutting performance and that it starts easily.

BAD POINTS

- Difficult to adjust the cutting height.
- Its noise is more annoying than other mowers'.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

- The motors of the **SUPASWIFT Lawn Cruiser**, **SUPASWIFT Lawn Leader** and **VICTA Vantage VAS401K** slowed a little in medium and long grass, but they still cut well in these conditions and their overall cutting scores were very good.
- The **ROVER Easy Start** gave only fair performance when cutting medium and long grass, with the motor slowing noticeably. The **MASPORT Rocket** also struggled a little in the medium grass, although fared a little better in longer grass (but still not as well as most others).



PROBLEMS

The fuel cap of the VICTA Vantage VAS201K leaked copiously and continuously throughout testing. The manufacturer assures us the problem has been rectified, and all models sold from mid-October should have the modified cap fitted.

PROFILES: GEOFF AMBLER

Brand / model (in rank order)	PERFORMANCE 1 Overall score (%)	2 Cutting score (%)	3 Ease of use score (%)	4 Noise at 7.5 m / user's position (dB)	SPECIFICATIONS 2- or 4-stroke	5 Number of cutting positions	5 Cutting height range (mm)	Width of cut (cm)*	6 Catcher capacity (kg)	Weig (kg)*
HONDA Residential HRU 19R	87	98	71	72 / 84	4	11	15-75	47	5.5	27
ROVER 2-Stroke XL 03522	86	98	69	74 / 89	2	12	15-60	45	5.6	26
VIKING MB435	86	98	69	71 / 86	4	10	15-70	46	4.9	27
MASPORT Impact	84	96	65	71 / 85	4	10	15-70	46	5.0	26
VICTA Vantage VAS201K	84	98	63	73 / 88	2	11	10-75	46	4.9	26
SUPASWIFT Lawn Cruiser	80	88	69	69 / 84	4	12	10-65	46	4.6	25
VICTA Vantage VAS401K	80	88	68	71 / 85	4	11	10-75	46	4.7	24
SUPASWIFT Lawn Leader	79	88	65	73 / 86	4	12	10-70	46	4.6	24
ROVER Easy Start 30026	74	76	70	70 / 86	4	9	10-55	46	4.8	24
MASPORT Rocket	72	78	64	73 / 86	4	9	10-65	46	5.3	22

How reliable have subscribers found them?

We asked a group of subscribers if they'd had any problems with their lawnmowers over the previous 12 months and whether they'd buy the same brand again.

Electric lawnmowers were the most reliable, with only 9% requiring repair, followed by four-stroke petrol mowers (17%), with two-stroke mowers the least reliable (22% were repaired).

For **VICTA** mowers up to three years old, subscribers reported having more problems with the starting mechanism than for other brands, while **MTD** owners reported more problems with the catcher.

The graphs show the results for brands for which we received more than 50 replies (the numbers in brackets show how many people reported on each brand). Electric mowers aren't included.

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR

(Differences of more than 7% between brands are meaningful)

All petrol mowers (11,702)	82
Honda (847)	89
Flymo (405)	88
Masport (2147)	86
Rover (2672)	84
Electrolux (131)	81
Victa (4908)	80
Husqvarna (148)	77
MTD (444)	72

What to look for

- **Four-stroke or two-stroke?** Four-stroke models are more popular and create less pollution (see *What kind of mower?*, right, for more).
- The **handle** height should be adjustable and the handle comfortable to hold: a turned-up handle gives you a more comfortable wrist angle. The handle of the **MASPORT Rocket** was considered too low for someone of average height.
- The **engine control lever** shouldn't be too stiff, and it's easier to get at if it's on the handlebar.
- Look for a large number of **cutting positions** spread over a good range of cutting **heights**.

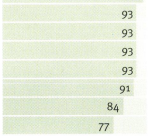
Check that the starter cord toggle is on the engine for easy pull. Cords mounted high up on the handle like the two Supaswift models require a lot of shoulder effort to pull.

This will make it easier to set the right height for both normal and overgrown lawns.

- Check it's **easy to change the cutting height** using one lever that acts on all four wheels — adjusting the height of each wheel separately is time-consuming.
- A **rigid plastic catcher** is better than the bag type (which might let dust and clippings blow all over you). It should also have two handles: one on top for carrying, the other on the back for easy emptying.
- Check the mower won't be any more **noisy** than most or **vibrate** annoyingly.
- Make sure it's **easy to push** and **manoeuvre** — big wheels make it easier to handle on rough ground.
- A **wash nozzle** on top of the housing makes it easy to clean underneath (including the blades).
- Check the mower is simple to **maintain:** how easy is it to change the oil, air filter and spark plug?

Warranty (years)	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Price ($)**
2 **(A)**	Australia	Honda	739
1	Australia	Rover Mowers	519 **(E)**
1 **(B)**	NZ	Stihl	690
2 **(C)**	NZ	Masport	649
1	Australia	Sunbeam Victa	449
1 **(D)**	Australia	Allpower Industries	625
1	Australia	Sunbeam Victa	449
1 **(D)**	Australia	Allpower Industries	566
1	Australia	Rover Mowers	409 **(E)**
2 **(C)**	NZ	Masport	500

PERCENTAGE WHO'D BUY THE SAME BRAND AGAIN



* *Rounded to the nearest centimetre / kilogram.*

** *Prices are recommended retail, as provided by manufacturers in September 2001.*

(A) *Two years for the engine; one year for the chassis.*

(B) *Two years if checked by Stihl within a month of purchase.*

(C) *Two years for the engine; three years for the steel chassis; "lifetime" for the catcher.*

(D) *One year for the engine; two years for the chassis.*

(E) *Rover gave the "average" rather than recommended retail price.*

1 Overall score

The overall score is a combination of ease of use and cutting score, weighted as follows:

- Cutting score: 60%
- Ease of use: 40%

2 Cutting score

This combines scores from cutting tests done on short (30-40 mm), medium (75-100 mm) and long (300-400 mm) grass, weighted as follows:

- Short (40%)
- Medium (40%)
- Long (20%)

3 Ease of use score

We considered eight factors, each of which was weighted equally:

- Vibration.
- Manoeuvring.
- Pushing.
- Controls.
- Cutting height adjustment.
- Starting.
- The catcher.
- Handle comfort.

4 Noise

We measured the noise from the user's level and at 7.5 m from each mower. Petrol mowers tend to be noisier than electric ones; the two-stroke models in this test were slightly noisier than their four-stroke cousins.

5 Number of cutting positions/ cutting height range

The length the grass is cut to can be varied by adjusting the height of the blade above the ground. These columns show both the number of positions available and the range of approximate lengths of grass you can cut to. It's awkward to adjust the cutting position on some models (see the profiles, page 43).

The cutting heights shown aren't the exact length of grass you'll get, as we measured the distance between the blade and the bottom of the wheels, but it gives a sense of the differences between models. If your lawn is very overgrown, a mower with a very low maximum height will probably have more trouble cutting it.

6 Catcher capacity

The amount of clippings each catcher can hold was measured by weighing it with and without clippings and subtracting the empty catcher's weight.

This doesn't mean your catcher will always hold this weight of grass when it's full — the exact weight will vary with the type of grass and its moisture content. However, all the catchers were tested in the same grass conditions, so the results given are comparative. The larger the number, the less often you have to empty the catcher.

WHAT KIND OF MOWER?

You have several options when buying a lawnmower, depending on the size of your lawn, how much exercise you're willing to put in and your concern for the environment.

PETROL MOWERS

The most popular mowers are petrol-powered and have a catcher. Four-stroke mowers make up most of the market and are the more environmentally friendly option; with two-stroke motors the petrol and oil are mixed together, so they're more polluting than four-stroke mowers because the oil is burnt along with the petrol.

Mulching mowers — which leave very fine grass clippings behind — help recycle nutrients from the cut grass, reducing the need for fertilisers. If you prefer to use a catcher, you can spread the clippings around garden beds, trees and shrubs, or add them to your compost heap.

ELECTRIC MOWERS

Electric mowers are quieter than petrol ones and less polluting — not at all if you use green power. One of the hassles with them is avoiding the cord, although there are cordless models available. Advances in battery technology mean you can run them for up to three hours after charging (although even some of the older models can cut a fairly large backyard on an overnight charge).

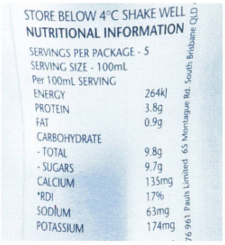
PUSH MOWERS

Believe it or not, the market segment that's really taking off in the US is the old-style manual push (or reel) mower. They're quiet, non-polluting, cheap and great exercise.

But one of the main reasons for their popularity among a burgeoning population of lawn perfectionists is the way they cut the grass — they use a scissor-like cutting action instead of a tearing action like motor mowers, which not only gives your lawn a better look, but is better for the individual grass plants.

Serve sizes

When you read a nutrition panel, do you ever forget to check what serve size it refers to? A subscriber brought a 500 mL bottle of flavoured milk to our attention. The serving size in the nutrition panel is 100 mL, so if you drank the bottle in one go, you'd be getting five times the amount listed there — which works out as over 50 g of sugar. If you glanced at the nutrition panel quickly you might think it contained only 10 g. The same thing applies to yoghurt, which is often in a 200 g tub, but lists the serving size as 100 g. You get the amount of nutrients listed in the nutrition panel by only eating half the tub. The labelling meets regulations, but isn't necessarily intuitive.


STORE BELOW 4°C SHAKE WELL

NUTRITIONAL INFORMATION

SERVINGS PER PACKAGE - 5	
SERVING SIZE - 100mL	
Per 100mL SERVING	
ENERGY	264kJ
PROTEIN	3.8g
FAT	0.9g
CARBOHYDRATE	
- TOTAL	9.8g
- SUGARS	9.7g
CALCIUM	135mg
*RDI	17%
SODIUM	63mg
POTASSIUM	174mg

76 961 Pauls Limited 65 Montague Rd, South Brisbane QLD

PHOTOS: VANESSA MARSHALL

So if you're a label checker, add one more thing to your checklist — the serve size the information refers to.

Sourdough bread

A subscriber wrote to us recently with a label from a loaf of sourdough bread claiming to be 'yeast-free'. She was under the correct impression that sourdough bread still contains yeast.

Sourdough differs from other bread in the source of the yeast. The yeast most bread is made from is a specially cultured baker's yeast; sourdough bread is made from 'wild' yeast. It's captured from the air in a liquid medium (usually a mixture of water and flour) to make a 'starter', which can be kept alive for future use and which gives sourdough bread its distinctive taste.

So anyone who's sensitive to yeasts should also beware of sourdough bread.

TV ads encourage kids to eat more fat and sugar

A study conducted by a nutrition and dietetics masters student at Flinders University in Adelaide has found that of recent food ads run in 63 hours of children's TV viewing times, almost 80% were for foods whose nutritional value is marginal. The majority of food ads were for ice cream, biscuits, hamburgers, chocolate, soft drinks and similar foods.

There's plenty of research to show that food advertising does affect young children's food preferences (see CHOICE, June 2001, page 6). So it's no wonder childhood obesity is becoming a problem. It doesn't end there, though, as studies have shown that childhood dietary behaviour is a difficult habit to break, and will often extend into adulthood.

The Consumers' Association has been campaigning for many years for stricter control over advertising to children. In 1996 we were involved in an international survey co-ordinated by Consumers International, which sadly found Australia led the way in the number of ads and the amount of advertising time per hour shown during children's programs. Back then, 39% of the ads shown were for food, with the majority being for foods that are typically high in sugar, fat and/or salt. Five years on it appears nothing much has changed; 38% of the ads were for food.

We'd like to see much tighter control by the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) over the amount and type of advertising that's allowed to be shown during both children's and general viewing time slots. If this is something that concerns you too, let the TV networks know, and also write to the ABA at PO Box Q500, Queen Victoria Building, NSW 1230.

USE-BY DATES

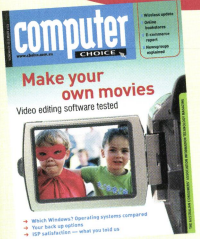
For some time, use-by and best-before dates have just been a guide to how long the unopened food should keep its quality and wholesomeness if it's stored correctly. That means food can legally be sold after its use-by date — but how you're supposed to work out if it's safe to eat is anyone's guess.

New regulations, to take effect in early 2003, will make it much clearer:

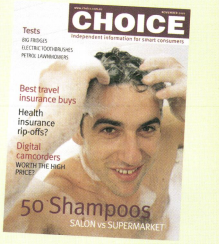
- **Use by**: If a food can become unsafe, it must have a use-by date and can't be sold after that date.
- **Best before**: Most other foods must have best-before date, which is a guide to how long they'll keep their quality. Exceptions are foods that can last for two years or more, such as some canned food.

Don't get caught out this Christmas...

Gift ideas



CHOICE $59.40
(11 issues per year)
The inside information to help you make better buys, avoid duds and save time and money.



***Computer* CHOICE** $39.60
(6 issues per year)
Well researched information in an easy-to-read format to help you get the most out of your computer. Ideal for the beginner or intermediate computer user.

CHOICE *Health Reader* $55.00
(10 issues per year)
This easy-to-read newsletter covers the latest developments you need to know in medical, nutrition, exercise and general health research.

Christmas gift subscription orders must be received by December 12 and will be mailed to recipients on December 13 to ensure delivery before Christmas.

Whether you're subscribing for yourself or as a gift, we'll send the latest issue as a FREE bonus.

Order two or more gift subscriptions and get a free CHOICE book to the value of $25. Call (02) 9577 3399 for details.

Order Form

INS/0111

Qty	Item	Price	Subtotal
____	**CHOICE**	$59.40	_____
____	***Computer* CHOICE**	$39.60	_____
____	**CHOICE *Health Reader***	$55.00	_____
		Total	_____

I wish to pay by ❍ Cheque ❍ Money order
payable to the Australian Consumers' Association

or, I wish to pay by ❍ Bankcard ❍ Mastercard ❍ Visa ❍ Amex ❍ Diners Club

Card no. _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

Name of cardholder .....

Signature ..... Expiry date .....

Subscriber details

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms .....

Address .....

Postcode ..... Phone ..... Subscriber no. .....

Gift recipient details (We'll send a gift card — see below)

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms .....

Address .....

..... Postcode .....

Gift magazine(s) .....

Message .....

Send gift renewal notice to me ❍ Yes ❍ No

Post this coupon to: **Australian Consumers' Association**, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, or fax it to (02) 9577 3355.
ACN 000 281 925 ABN 35 799 246 568 **This may be used as a tax invoice.**

Our website has more information than even CHOICE itself — items that lend themselves better to the web medium than to print, for example, and some that are simply extra content to that published in the magazine.

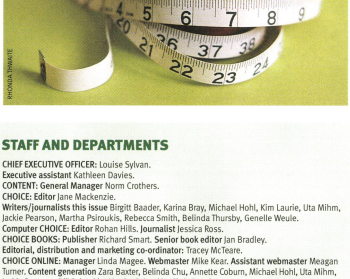
If you're a current personal CHOICE subscriber you can get free trial access to the website. To register, just call us on (02) 9577 3399 and have your email address ready.

To whet your interest, here are some picks from the current information available on www.choice.com.au.

GET IN SHAPE FOR SUMMER

If the thought of putting on a swimming costume gives you the chills, it could be time to get your diet in order — CHOICE Online has a number of quizzes to help work out whether you really need to lose weight and, if so, how to do it wisely. Click on 'Food' in 'browse by category' on the home page, scroll down to 'Quizzes' and choose the one that interests you.

With the 'Fat quiz' you fill in the amount of certain types of food you eat and it works out your total fat intake, letting you know whether it's OK or too much — there are tips to follow to reduce your fat intake if it's too high. There's also a link to take you easily to our article 'Fats ain't fats', for information on types of fat, from monos and polys to saturated and trans fats (the riskier ones in terms of heart disease).



MICHAELA TABACCHI

In 'How's your diet?' you fill in the amount, on average, of serves from each food group (plus extras) that you eat each day, and it works out if you're eating enough, too little or too much of each.

Then there's the clincher — 'Check your weight'. It won't hurt as much as strenuous exercise, and you might even be pleasantly surprised by your result. Just type in your height, weight and waist measurement to get a rundown on which weight range you fall into. If the result isn't as good as it might be, you can get tips on what you could do differently to try to change your weight.

ALL YOU NEED ON CARS...

To help make car maintenance easier and buying a used car less of a gamble, we've put together a range of short articles with tips and step-by-step guides to basic car maintenance, repairs, driving skills and other car-related issues. To find it follow these steps:

- Go to 'browse by category' on the home page.
- Click on 'Cars and Transport'.
- Click on 'How to', the subcategory on the right.
- Scroll down to the topic you want.

The information varies from how to change a wheel, care for tyres or jump-start a car, to how to install a child restraint, drive fuel-efficiently and even how to tow a trailer.

If you want to buy a used car that doesn't turn out to be a lemon, try our guide on how to '...check a used car'. And how to '...deal with your mechanic' could help if you never quite know the right questions to ask.

In 'Cars and Transport' you can also find links to other helpful information, such as:

- The interactive databases for new and used cars in 'Buying a car'.
- The 'Crash Lab', which includes interactive online tools to help you find out how expensive your car is to repair or how safe it is.
- 'Parts & Products', with information on everything from airbag safety to petrol prices.
- 'Cars & the Environment' — and more.

IS YOUR HOME COVERED?

Have you checked your contents insurance lately? The amount you're insured for might seem high, but is it enough to replace everything you own? Use our comprehensive worksheet to work out what you need. Type 'contents insurance worksheet' in the search box on the home page to find it.

Print it out and walk from room to room in your home (including through the garage and garden), fill in values for the items you have and any additional items not mentioned in our list. Then just add up the figures in the right-hand column. We've also provided an approximate price range to help you estimate the replacement price for your contents.

If you're among the 30% of people without any cover — or the 40% of those with cover but not enough — it should be just the tool you need to assess how you stand. ■

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TEST RESEARCH (NATA-accredited) provides independent, fee-for-service testing and research on consumer products, services and regulatory issues for other consumer organisations, governments and industry; under some conditions it undertakes public testing. **Contact** Jeanette Dwyer on (02) 9577 3399.
Marketing statistics by GfK Marketing Services. **Financial information** supplied by Cannex. **Services information** supplied by ASSIRT.

The Australian Consumers' Association is governed by an honorary Council elected by the voting members. (For information about voting membership, contact CHOICE Consumer Information on (02) 9577 3399.) Members of the Council give their time without reimbursement, and are not engaged as principals in industry, advertising or sales.
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RECALLS & BANS

If you find a recall or ban not on our list, please let us know. Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after the recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

THE PRODUCT: NSW Fair Trading has ordered the recall of **Circumearth coloured mothballs**. They're imported from Asia, packaged in clear plastic bags with Chinese writing on them, and a sticker in English identifying them as mothballs and warning that they shouldn't be eaten.
The problem: The mothballs are brightly coloured, like lollies, but contain camphor — swallowing only half of one mothball could be fatal for a small child.
What to do: Throw the mothballs away, or return them to the place of purchase for a refund. For information about poisons, call the 24-hour Poisons Information Hotline on 13 11 26.

THE PRODUCT: Bayer has recalled the cholesterol-lowering drug **cerivastatin sodium**, sold as **Lipobay** or **Kazak 200, 300 or 400**.
The problem: The drug may cause unwanted side effects, particularly to muscle, and could potentially affect the kidneys and other organs — it has been implicated in 31 deaths in the US.
What to do: Don't take the drug, particularly in combination with other drugs, such as gemfibrozil. See your doctor, particularly if you're experiencing muscle aches and pains.

THE PRODUCT: Biomet Australia, Smith & Nephew Surgical, DePuy Australia, Zimmer Australia, Taylor Bryant and **Stryker Australia** have recalled **zirconia ceramic femoral head prostheses** (components used in hip replacements), manufactured by Saint Gobain Ceramiques Avancées Desmarquest, in France, since 1998.
NOTE: Hip implants with femoral head components made from other materials, such as alumina or steel, are not affected. And zirconia femoral head prostheses manufactured by Ceramtech or Morgan Matrock aren't affected.
The problem: Some batches of the prostheses may spontaneously disintegrate, possibly causing a sudden inability to walk, a sudden pain in the hip and/or a sudden jolt in the hip that has been operated on.
What to do: If you've had a hip replacement since 1998, talk to your orthopaedic surgeon to find out whether it's affected by this recall. If you've experienced any of the above symptoms, seek urgent medical attention from your surgeon, or the nearest emergency department of a hospital.

For further information go to www.tga.health.gov.au and click on 'Zirconia Ceramic Femoral Head Hip Prostheses' towards the top right, then on 'questions and answers', 'hazard alert' and/or 'media release'.

THE PRODUCT: Harkola has recalled **halawa with pistachios**, a Middle Eastern sweet, also known as helva or halwa, imported from Lebanon and sold in Queensland, NSW and Victoria, in 900 g plastic tubs fitted with screw-top lids.
The problem: The product may be contaminated with *Salmonella Amsterdam*.
What to do: Don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund. For further information call Harkola on (02) 9649 4448.

THE PRODUCT: PJ Ducat & Sons has recalled **Big M chocolate flavoured milk**, sold in 300 and 600 mL cartons, with a use-by date of 20 August, and distributed throughout northern Victoria.
The problem: The milk may contain bacteria that can cause illness in pregnant women, the very young, the elderly and people with low immune systems.
What to do: Don't drink the milk. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund. For further information call (03) 5823 4800.

THE PRODUCT: Vincent Vegetarian Food Distributors has recalled **Wanjashan soy sauce** (all use-by dates) in Victoria. It was imported from Taiwan around June 2000, and sold in 500 mL bottles in the Melbourne metropolitan region, mainly through specialty Asian stores.
The problem: The sauce contains unacceptable levels of a chemical, 3-MCPD.
What to do: Return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

THE PRODUCT: Vihenthi Co has recalled **Golden Mountain soya bean sauce** (all use-by dates) in WA and SA. It was manufactured in Thailand and sold in 740 mL and 200 mL glass bottles, mainly through Asian retail stores in the Perth metropolitan region, and in Mansfield Park in SA.
The problem: The sauce contains unacceptable levels of a chemical, 3-MCPD.
What to do: Return it to the place of purchase for a refund. For further information contact the Food Safety Section, Department of Health (WA), (08) 9388 4903.

THE PRODUCT: Kongs Trading and **Trans Asian Food Centre** have recalled **Golden Mountain soya bean seasoning sauce** (all use-by dates) in WA. The sauce was manufactured in Thailand and sold in 740 mL and 200 mL glass bottles, mainly through Asian retail outlets.
The problem: The sauce contains unacceptable levels of a chemical, 3-MCPD.
What to do: Return it to the place of purchase for a refund. For further information contact the Food Safety Section of the Department of Health (WA), on (08) 9388 4903.

THE PRODUCT: Norco Pauls has recalled **Norco Country-Style Vanilla Custard** in south-east Queensland and northern NSW. The custard comes in a 2 L plastic carton with a best-before date of 18 Sept 01.
The problem: It may contain listeria, which can cause illness in some people.
What to do: Return it to the place of purchase for a refund. For further information contact the Consumer Information Centre on (07) 5509 9530.

THE PRODUCT: Kambrook has recalled **Kambrook electric frypans — model KEF015**, batch no. 042. Both the model and batch no. appear on the underside, stamped into the metal surround where the temperature control probe would normally be inserted; if the three-digit no. is '042' the frypan is subject to recall.
The problem: Due to a possible manufacturing defect the frypan may present an electric shock hazard.
What to do: Don't use it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund or replacement. For further information, call the Kambrook Customer Care Service Centre on 1300 139 798, Monday to Friday, 9 am–5 pm (EST).

THE PRODUCT: GurlsRoom has recalled **GurlsRoom beanbag covers**.
The problem: The covers don't comply with the mandatory product safety standard — they don't have a child-resistant slide-fastener, and so can be easily opened; the polystyrene beans pose a choking hazard to children.
What to do: Return the beanbags to the place of purchase, or to GurlsRoom, for a refund. For further information call GurlsRoom on (03) 9646 1644.

THE PRODUCT: Creative Brands has recalled two sunscreen products:
- **Le Tan Sensitive SPF30+** (100 mL tubes) with batch numbers as follows: (B) 00713, expiry 06/2003 (B) 00904, expiry 09/2003 (B) 10124, expiry 01/2004
- **Le Tan Sport & Surf SPF30+** (100 mL tubes) with batch numbers as follows: (B) 00713, expiry 06/2003 (B) 00904, expiry 09/2003 (B) 00912, expiry 09/2003 (B) 01113, expiry 09/2003

The batch numbers are embossed on the tube crimp.
The problem: The products may have a watery consistency and breakdown of emulsion, so won't provide the claimed UVA and UVB protection.
What to do: Don't use them. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund, or phone Creative Brands on 1300 650 981, 9 am–5 pm (EST), to arrange for the product's return and a refund.

THE PRODUCT: Telechoice has recalled **mountain bikes** given away in a Telechoice mobile phone promotion launched in February 2001.
The problem: The bike doesn't comply with the Australian standard for pedal bicycles (AS1927). There is some inconsistency in the shape of the front fork in the area where the front axle is held, which may result in the front wheel becoming detached if it's not assembled correctly.
What to do: Contact Telechoice on (03) 9329 4555, 9 am–5.30 pm (EST), or by fax on (03) 9329 4499, to arrange for a free inspection and modification of the bike.

Continued overleaf

RECALLS & BANS

Continued from page 49

THE PRODUCT: Cussons has recalled its range of **Imperial Leather talcum powder**, 250 g, marked 'Made in Indonesia' and sold after September 2000. (Products marked 'Made in Australia' aren't affected by this recall.)
The problem: Low levels of microbiological contamination have been detected, and there's a very low risk that using the talc on areas with sores, open wounds or broken skin could cause a very serious infection.
What to do: Don't use the talc. Return it to Cussons, 282–300 Hammond Road, Dandenong 3175, which will refund postage costs and the retail price. For more information call 1800 660 020, Monday to Saturday, 9 am–5 pm (EST).

THE PRODUCT: Mackell Trading Company has recalled **2 litre hot water bottles** with flannel cloth covers, sold in IGA retail and Campbell's Cash & Carry warehouse stores since May 10, 2001. They carry the marking BS1970:1984 on the neck.
The problem: The hot water bottle may burst.
What to do: Don't use it. Return it to the place of purchase for a full refund. For more information phone Mackell Trading Company on (02) 9316 4155, 8 am–5.30 pm (EST).

THE PRODUCT: Peugeot Concessionaires Australia has recalled **Peugeot 406** MY 2001 CPA 11339 model vehicles within the following VIN range:
VF38BRFRR81168659–81204751.
The problem: The brake vacuum pipe and the engine wiring loom may come into contact and wear through, possibly causing a loss of braking ability.
What to do: Contact your local authorised Peugeot dealer to determine if your vehicle is one of the 38 affected and, if so, have repairs made at no charge.

THE PRODUCT: DaimlerChrysler Australia has recalled **Chrysler Voyager** and **Grand Voyager** vehicles, built before August 23, 2000.
The problem: A problem with the self-adjust mechanism may cause the park brake to lose tension and allow the vehicle to roll if the transmission is not in 'park'.
What to do: Contact any authorised Chrysler Jeep dealer to arrange to have the park brake lever cable replaced with a shorter one, and a lockout clip installed at no charge (in around half an hour).

THE PRODUCT: Drew Price Engineering has recalled **Arrow Go Karts.**
The problem: The brake master cylinder bracket may crack at the point where the bracket is welded to the chassis.
What to do: Owners should receive from Drew Price Engineering a special retro-fit billet alloy support bracket that bolts to the chassis. For further information call Drew Price Engineering on (03) 9545 3944.

THE PRODUCT: BMW Australia has recalled **BMW R1100 S model motorcycles**, with VIN ranges from ZA80001 to ZA88666.
The problem: The fuel hose leading to the right-hand side of the vehicle can become chafed between the fuel supply and return lines, which, in extreme cases, can result in fuel escaping from the fuel distributor.
What to do: Contact any authorised BMW dealer immediately to arrange for your motorcycle to be checked and, if necessary, the problem rectified at no charge. Please contact BMW if you've sold your motorcycle. For further information call the BMW Access Centre on 1800 813 299.

THE PRODUCT: Vehicle Development Corporation has recalled the following **VDC Ford F series vehicles: F250, F350, F450** and **F550.**
The problem: Some vehicles may have been fitted with steering components that may be below specification, risking the possibility of steering failure.
What to do: Don't drive the vehicle until it's been inspected and, if necessary, modified. For more information contact VDC on (03) 9357 0208.

THE PRODUCT: Universal Gift Traders has recalled **portable Ginna model floor lamps**, also known as the **Magic Floor Lamp**, in styles of dolphin, tropical fish and starry night. The lamps stand 89 cm high and the insides revolve after the lamp is switched on, casting reflections around the walls of a room.
The problem: The lamps don't comply with electrical safety requirements — the absence of a cover over the supply terminals allows access to single-insulated wiring and live parts, and contact between this wiring and the unearthed exposed metal frame, risking electric shock.
What to do: Return the lamp to the place of purchase for a refund.

THE PRODUCT: Mitsubishi Motors Australia has recalled **UG Nimbus vehicles** built from October 6, 1997, to December 28, 2000, with the following VIN ranges:
JMFLRN84WXZ000101 to
JMFLRN84W1Z000339
JMFLRR84WXZ000101 to
JMFLRR84W1Z000190
The problem: Internal pressure changes may cause expansion and contraction of the fuel tank, which may cause the fuel tank upper panel to crack. This could cause fuel leakage when the tank's full.
What to do: Contact your local authorised Mitsubishi Motors dealer to arrange inspection of the fuel tank and, if necessary, free replacement. For further information call Mitsubishi on 1300 13 12 11, 7.30 am–7.30 pm (CST).

THE PRODUCT: Autobarn has recalled **jack ramps** sold through some of its franchised stores from December 1997 to June 2001.
The problem: The jack ramps don't meet the requirements of the Australian standard, particularly since they don't meet the structural integrity tests.
What to do: Don't use the ramps. Return them to the Autobarn store you purchased them from for a refund. For more information contact Les Somers at Autobarn head office on (03) 9840 1033.

THE PRODUCT: Honda Australia has recalled 2001 year model **Honda Civic vehicles**, with the following VIN ranges:

From:	To:
JHMEU37301S200003	S201346
JHMEU38301S200003	S201346
JHMEU37501S200003	S201346
JHMEU38501S200003	S201346
JHMEU37701S200003	S201346
JHMEU38701S200003	S201346
JHMEU37801S200003	S201346
JHMEU38801S200003	S201346
JHMES15501S200010	S201270
JHMES16501S200010	S201270
JHMES15901S200010	S201270
JHMES16901S200010	S201270
JHMES15001S200010	S201270
JHMES16001S200010	S201270

The VIN is in the engine compartment, on the rear panel (firewall), and inside the front cover of the Owner's Warranty and Service Policy Manual.
The problem: In the event of a substantial frontal impact to the vehicle, the fuel filler pipe band may leak due to possible movement of the fuel tank.
What to do: Contact an authorised Honda dealer to have the fuel filler pipe band retorqued at no charge. For further enquiries, contact Honda Australia on 1800 804 954, Monday to Friday, 8.30 am–5.30 pm (EST).

THE PRODUCT: DaimlerChrysler Australia has recalled **Mercedes-Benz A Class vehicles**, manufactured from September 2000 to January 2001.
The problem: Under certain conditions (below freezing) the master brake cylinder rubber seal may be faulty, possibly delaying the build-up of full brake pressure and lengthening braking distance.
What to do: Contact your local authorised Mercedes-Benz dealer to find out if yours is one of the 70 affected vehicles and, if so, have the master brake cylinder replaced free, or for further information phone Mercedes-Benz on (03) 9566 9266.

THE PRODUCT: Mitsubishi Motors Australia has recalled a number of **Magna/Verada wagon vehicles**, produced from November 1996 to May 2000, with VIN ranges that end in the following six digits (all inclusive):

Model	From:	To:
TE Magna wagon	023393	038761
TF Magna wagon	000002	060026
TH Magna wagon	000010	030303
TJ Magna wagon	000011	000013
KE Verada wagon	000338	003563
KF Verada wagon	000001	009537
KH Verada wagon	000004	004812
KJ Verada wagon	000007	000007

The vehicle identification number (VIN) is on the vehicle compliance plate attached to the centre of the dash panel in the engine compartment.
The problem: The electrical wiring harness for the fuel pump and fuel gauge assembly may become damaged on some vehicles due to insufficient clearance from the underbody structure. This could cause the ignition switch fuse to blow and the engine to stop.
What to do: Contact an authorised Mitsubishi Motors dealer to make an appointment to have a new harness fitted free of charge. For further information call Mitsubishi on 1300 13 12 11.

Weekly updates of recalls and bans are posted on the CHOICE website at www.choice.com.au. You can also email us any recalls or bans not on this list at ausconsumer@choice.com.au.

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December 2000 — November 2001

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Bold type indicates a test, survey or trial report, normal type indicates other articles.
* indicates an update of a previous report, additions or corrections to reports, small follow-up items or letters. For space reasons, the index generally doesn't include Choice Cuts, many other small pieces, and Recalls and Bans.

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CD players, personal **Jun**
Child/baby concerns
baby monitors **Jul**
head lice treatments Aug
highchairs **Aug**, Oct*
immunisation Oct
Coffee, instant **Oct**
Coffee machines **Apr**
Column heaters **May**
Cordless phones **Jan/Feb**
Credit card loyalty schemes Oct

Depilatory creams **Mar**
Digital cameras **Jun**
Digital TV May
Dishwashers **May, Jul***
Drugs, generic Nov
Ducted air conditioning Oct
DVD players **May**

Eggs Jan/Feb
Electric frypans **Aug**
Electric toothbrushes **Nov**
Electrolysis, hair removal Jun
Energy drinks Aug, Oct*
Epilators **Mar**
Espresso machines **Apr**, Aug*

Fax machines **Sep**, Nov*
Financial — see also Banks
interest rates Dec
investment seminars Aug
managed funds Jan/Feb
margin loans Oct
retire at 50 Apr, Sep*
Flu shots May, Jul*
Food
alfalfa sprouts **Sep**
coffee, instant **Oct**
eggs Jan/Feb
energy drinks Aug
ham, sliced and shredded **May**
honey Jun
ice cream **Jan/Feb**
meat labelling Nov
muffins **Jul**
mushrooms Oct
noodles, two-minute **Mar**
pâté **Jul**
salad Sep, Oct*
sauces, simmer Apr
spreads, dairy and margarine **Aug**
Food warming tray **Nov**
Freedom of information Jan/Feb
Freezers, small **Aug**
Fridges
385–420 L **Jun**
530–560 L **Nov**
Frypans, electric **Aug**

Garden
lawnmowers, petrol **Nov**
secateurs **Sep**, Nov*
Gas barbecues **Dec**
Generic drugs Nov

Hair removal **Mar**
electrolysis and laser Jun
Ham, sliced and shredded **May**
Hands-free kits for
mobile phones **Apr**
Head lice treatments Aug
Health
alternative therapies Sep
BSE/vCJD Mar
flu shots May, Jul*
generic drugs Nov
immunisation, children Oct
insurance
update Jun, Aug*, Nov*
myths Jul
water, how much should you drink? Oct
Heaters, column **May**
Highchairs **Aug**, Oct*
Home entertainment
what you need May
DVD players **May**
Home/property inspections **Mar**
Home security
DIY alarms **May**, Nov*
makeover May
Honey Jun
House and contents
insurance **Sep**, Nov*

Ice cream **Jan/Feb**
Ice cream makers **Dec**
Immobilisers, car Nov
Immunisation, children Oct
Index, four-year Jun
Insurance
health, update Jun, Aug*, Nov*
house and contents **Sep**, Nov*
travel **Nov**
Investment seminars Aug

Laser hair removal Jun
Laundry tablets **Jul**
Lawnmowers, petrol **Nov**
Light bulbs, incandescent **Oct**
Loyalty schemes, credit cards Oct

Mad cow disease Mar
Managed funds Jan/Feb
Margin loans Oct
Meat labelling Nov
Media, science reporting Mar
Microwave ovens, 30–35L **Jul**
Mobile phones
hands-free kits **Apr**
WAP technology Apr
Money — see Financial
Mops, steam **Apr**
Muffins **Jul**
Mushrooms Oct

Nail polish **Jul**
Noodles, two-minute **Mar**

Oriental carpets Jul, Oct *
Ovens, wall, electric
multifunction **Oct**

Pâté **Jul**
Pest control devices, electronic May
Phones
cordless **Jan/Feb**
mobile — see Mobile phones
plans, local and STD **Jul**
Power, standby Dec, May*, Aug*
Prescription drugs, generic Nov
Printers **Aug**
Property/home inspections **Mar**

Refrigerators — see Fridges
Retire at 50 Apr, Sep*
Reuse and repair centres Sep
Rice cookers **Jun**

Salad Sep, Oct*
Sauces, simmer Apr
Scanners, flatbed **Oct**
Science in the media Mar
Scooters **Dec**
Secateurs **Sep**, Nov*
Security
DIY home alarms **May**, Nov*
home makeover May
Shampoo **Nov**
Shavers, men's **Mar**
Shiraz **Dec**
Shopping, supermarket
price survey **Dec**
Shower gels **May**
Showers, solar camping **Apr**
Spreads, dairy and margarine **Aug**
Standby power Dec, May*, Aug*
Steam mops **Apr**
Supermarket prices **Dec**

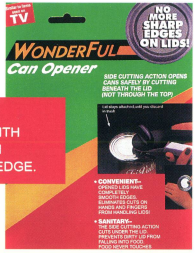
Telephones — see Phones
Television
digital May
51 cm **Apr**
Tents, dome **Apr**
Toasters **Apr**
Toilet paper **Jul**
Toothbrushes, electric **Nov**
Toothpaste **Jun**
Travel insurance **Nov**
Tyre and brake service chains **Oct**

Vacuum cleaners **Aug**
VCRs, hifi **Jan/Feb**
Video cameras, digital **Nov**

Wall ovens, electric
multifunction **Oct**
WAP technology Apr
Warming tray, food **Nov**
Washing machines **Mar, Sep**
Water, how much should you drink? Oct
Wax kits, hair removal **Mar**
Web cameras **Aug**
Webmail Oct
Wine, shiraz **Dec**

BECOME A FRIEND OF THE CONSUMERS' ASSOCIATION

The Australian Consumers' Association is completely funded by our subscribers, book purchasers and other customers. We don't receive ongoing funding from government or any commercial source. Your donation or bequest to ACA will assist our work of informing and representing Australian consumers. To make a donation or for further information, call Megan (pictured) on (02) 9577 3399 or write to: Friends of ACA, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.


As seen on TV
NO MORE SHARP EDGES ON LIDS!
WONDERFUL
Can Opener
SIDE CUTTING ACTION OPENS CANS SAFELY BY CUTTING BENEATH THE LID (NOT THROUGH THE TOP)
Lid stays attached until you discard it yourself
• CONVENIENT– OPENS LESS MESS, COMPLETELY NO SHARP EDGES, ELIMINATES CUTS ON HANDS AND FINGERS FROM HANDLING LIDS!
• SANITARY– SIDE CUTTING ACTION PREVENTS DIRTY LID FROM FALLING INTO FOOD. FOOD NEVER TOUCHES!

CAUTION:
AVOID CONTACT WITH RIM OF CAN WHICH MAY HAVE SHARP EDGE.

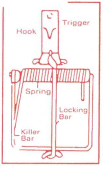
CUTTING EDGE TECHNOLOGY

After getting past all the hype about "no more sharp edges", "eliminates cuts", "opens cans safely" and even a demonstration of how safe the no-sharp-edges lid is, we loved the caution about the sharp-edged rim!

4 TRAPPES DE SOORIS JETABLE DISPOSABLE MOOSE TRAPS

SUFFERING FROM A MOOSE PLAGUE?

Unfortunately we're not sure whether these miniature "moose traps" will be up to the job — at the most, the beasts will suffer a little nip on the hoof.



DON'T YOU JUST LOVE THE SERVING SUGGESTION?

Somehow, you're supposed to revert this pasta sauce to its original ingredients and serve them artistically on a bench. Thanks for the tip — we'd never have thought of doing that.

However, we might have expected the container would become hot when heated, although with so many warnings about the bleeding obvious these days, you can never be too sure.

LATINA
FRESH
PASTA SAUCE
NEW RICHER SAUCE
425g
Directions: Remove lid and inner seal. Replace lid loosely and microwave sauce on HIGH/800watts/100% for 3-4 minutes*. Stirring half way through cooking time OR simmer sauce in a pan until hot. Toss with Latina Fresh Pasta. Serves 2.
SERVING SUGGESTION
King time OR simmer sauce in a pan until hot. Toss with L
*Time may vary depending on microwave wattage.
Caution: Container becomes HOT when heated.
within 3 days.
0 1323 663 0841
lynfoods.com
ITALIAN TOMATO & GARLIC
Rich, ripe tomatoes with fresh garlic, onions and herbs.
LSSTI/33

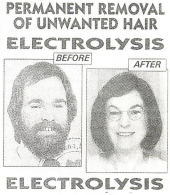
Payless Shampoo

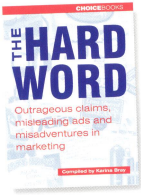
FOR EXTRA BODY HAIR

WHAT THE SHAMPOO GIVETH ...

... the electrolysis taketh away

... although it may take away a little more than you'd bargained for!





Want more of the Hard Word?

Then we have great news: the *Hard Word* book is out this month! See page 33 to order, and make sure you get in early to reserve copies for yourself, friends and family.

A RARE OPPORTUNITY?

We'd have thought it was *impossible* to buy two identical buses when there's only one left.

Crowthers are famous for the quality of their vehicles. Now is the opportunity to buy two identical second hand vehicles that are like new!

HOW ABOUT A LITTLE HELP?

The Hard Word would like to thank all the readers who've responded with examples of outrageous ads, promotions and products. Thanks to H Gollan, M Fairweather, E & J Moyle, V Markwart and S Kennewell for their contributions to this month's *Hard Word*. Please keep sending them in.

If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to *The Hard Word*, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, or email your suggestions to thehardword@choice.com.au.